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Author's Note

Thank you for taking a chance on this trilogy! I haven't written a Warriors story in years, oh god ^^". But I'm really excited to try again. I appreciate whatever feedback you decide to give. Interacting with my books highly encourages me to continue writing and will help motivate me to update more frequently. So please leave comments and favorite often!

Also, please note: my clans do not completely follow the way canon work. This is my own universe, and my clans have their own unique cultures, values, and traditions between them. More about that is explained on tumblr, so I do highly recommend you to check it out. Those who'd prefer not to can check out my other book "*Guide to the Land's Star*".
With all that said, lets get into the first installment of Signs of the Moon!

Prologue

[image]

Tree leaves shimmered in the light of the full moon, only being disturbed by a grey figure brushing pass to make way across sturdy tree limbs. As the trees began to thin out, the shape, a fluffy grey and white tom cat, made his way to the forest floor. The cat padded forward, continuing on his quest through the oak trees until he saw the familiar silhouette of another cat in the distance. Quickening his pace to a slight gallop, the tom caught up with the other cat, suddenly halting as if blocked by an invisible barrier. In the light of the full moon setting in the sky, the tom could make out the shimmering white and silver lynx point pelt of the other cat. Her blue eyes glimmered with excitement as he met with her at last.

"What took you so long?" The strange molly purred, taking a step forward to try and nuzzle the other, only to be met with rejection as the tom took a step back from her, avoiding her gaze.

"I have duties to attend to, remember?" The tom muttered, sounding unpleasant. The she-cat sat down, wrapping her plumed tail around her paws neatly, her tail tip twitching slightly. "You should know that by now."

"I do, thank you very much," the molly hissed in reply, raising her muzzle into the air and turned her face away snobbishly, eyes closed. "However when I ask you to meet me at a certain time I still expect you to show up when I ask." The tom twitched his ear sitting down and began to lick his paw, uncaring. The molly opened an eye to peek at the tom and huffed loudly as she saw his nonchalant posture, twitching her whiskers in annoyance. "How is your clan?" She asked, trying to keep an awkward silence from settling upon them.

"Treeclan is well. Though you should know this, seeing as how the gathering ended only a short while ago," the tom replied with a roll of his eyes.

"Right, how silly of me..." she meowed. "...and how's your new mate?"

The tom turned his gaze towards the she-cat now, his green eyes shining in the moonlight with fondness and love as he spoke.

"Brightsky is doing well. I'm happy to have her by my side," he purred, his tone now sounding more soft and gentle as he talked about his mate. "We just received news that she's expecting kits. My kits." The she-cat's ears perked in surprise, her blue eyes expressing sudden sadness. She dipped her head, not wanting the tom to take notice.

"I see...congratulations," she mewed quietly through gritted teeth. The tom nodded slightly, rising to his feet.

"So do you want to tell me why you asked to meet here, Snowfrost?"

The molly lifted her chin slightly, parting her lips to speak. "I..." she trailed off, unable to find the right words.

"You what?" The tom growled slightly, lashing his tail in the grass impatiently.

"Wolfheart, I'm pregnant." Snowfrost finally managed to choke out bluntly.

"What?!" Wolfheart yowled, taking a step back in astonishment. "You can't be. Snowfrost, we stopped meeting each other almost a moon ago. There's no way..." he trailed off, shock showing on his fluffy grey face.

"I'm a medicine cat. I know what the signs of pregnancy are," Snowfrost mewled curtly, lowering her ears.

"And that's the problem!" Wolfheart responded abruptly . "You're a medicine cat without an-"

"Well I have Goldenpaw!" Snowfrost interjected.

"Goldenpaw is still an apprentice. The Code states you must have a *fully trained* apprentice before having kits."

"I know what the Code says!" Snowfrost snapped, jumping to her paws. Her ears flattened against her head in despair, her claws kneading into the dirt. "Wolfheart, I asked you to come here tonight so we could discuss what we're going to do about my kits...our kits.... I don't want to leave them at Twolegplace. I can't stand the thought of them being kittypets. And I can't stand the thought of getting rid of them by..." she mewled in a panic, unable to finish her last statement. Wolfheart growled impatiently, beginning to pace along the invisible barrier- the border.

How could they be so careless? Both of them knew that they weren't allowed to have kits together until Snowfrost had given Goldenpaw, her apprentice, her true medicine cat name. Even if Goldenpaw was fully trained by this point, their relationship was over. There had been no bad blood between them when it happened, however Wolfheart had found himself developing feelings for his kithood friend, Brightsky, over two moons ago.

It all started when he told her about his secret relationship with the Grassclan medicine cat. Wolfheart half expected his long time friend to be angry with him for his treachery. Rather than getting mad, however, Brightsky was far more accepting. She understood that he couldn't help who he loved, and though she couldn't fully approve she would do anything to see the tom happy. She'd listen to Wolfheart talk about Snowfrost whenever they were alone, giving him helpful relationship advice whenever he'd need it. The two Treeclan cats bonded over their shared secret, and Wolfheart hoped he'd be able to keep up his relationship with the love and support of his friend. However, Snowfrost had started to grow jealous of the pair. She would often have an attitude whenever Wolfheart would mention the pretty white and black patched she-cat, venom dripping from her voice like poison from a viper's fangs whenever she'd parrot back any of the advice Wolfheart would share. She grew bitter towards Wolfheart and began to uphold the common snobby nature many Grassclan cats possessed. Eventually, the grey and white tom grew tired of the jealousy and conceded attitude, becoming more and more drawn towards Brightsky's gentle and gregarious nature. Like cracks in a crumbling stone, the forbidden romance began to come undone, and soon the pair agreed it would be best to go their separate ways. They planned to never meet again

and to remain separate no matter what may come. But fate works in mysterious ways. Like it or not Snowfrost became pregnant with his kits.

Wolfheart couldn't help but share her fears. He couldn't stand the thought of his children being kittypets, but he knew something bad would happen if Snowfrost kept them.

"We can't keep them, Snowfrost," Wolfheart stressed firmly. Though it was a painful choice to make, but it had to be done not just for Snowfrost's safety, but for the kits' as well. "Even if we aren't together anymore I don't want anything happening to you. It's hard...but at least we'll know they'll be safe. The Twolegs will take care of them."

Snowfrost's stared at him with disbelief, fur bristling with anger. Her blue gaze was like ice piercing through the grey and white tom mercilessly.

"How dare you!" She snarled, baring teeth bared threateningly. "We cannot let our kits be raised to live such a soft life! I expected better of you, Wolfheart. What happened to the tom I knew who would risk everything for the one he loves?" She accused, unsheathing her claws, digging them into the earth to keep herself from clawing at the Treeclan cat.

Wolfheart's ears twitched dismissively as he looked back at the furious she-cat, a chill running down his spine as his soft green eyes met her cold unforgiving gaze. "I would still risk everything for my mate. But you are not her. Not anymore. The kits are your responsibility, I have no say in what happens. But it would be best to take them to Twolegplace," he advised. Snowfrost took a step back, unable to be close to the other cat without acting out on the urge to slice his ears off. An uncomfortable silence now hung in the air around them, so thick it could be cut with the swipe of a claw.

"Fine." The lynx-point molly turned on her heels, facing away from Wolfheart. Her tail lashed violently and the grey and white tom couldn't help but wonder what was going on in that pretty she-cat's head. Without another word, Wolfheart watched Snowfrost take off, disappearing into the cool Greenleaf night.

***

The night was beginning to grow old as dawn soon approached. The full moon still hung lazily in the sky, illuminating the clearing of a clan camp. Not a cat could be seen out in the open as all were asleep peacefully in their dens, enjoying their dreams and restful slumber. One cat in particular was having a very odd dream.
A pale ginger and white molly awoke to find herself in a starry field, a fine mist hanging in the air around her. Each blade of grass under her paws was covered in dew which resembled twinkling stars. Curious and a bit frightened, the molly walked around. This place was familiar to her by now, she had been here many times after all, but it never got easier. She was always so overwhelmed by the scene, she still couldn't believe she was accepted to train to play such an important role in her clan. But this was an important part of being a medicine cat. The molly wondered what news Starclan chose to share this evening. Out of the mist stepped a star studded being; a white cat with a black leopard spotted coat came into the young she-cat's view, her pelt baring stars on every fur strand.

"Goldenpaw," meowed the cat.

"Hello, Softpetal," Goldenpaw greeted the molly, Grassclan's former medicine cat. "What news do you bring me this evening?"

"Words not to be repeated. Ones only Whitestar may know," Softpetal stated in a serious tone. Goldenpaw lowered her ears, her green eyes filled with concern. This had to be important, especially if she couldn't confide in her mentor to help interpret her ancestors words like she usually did.

To her surprise, Snowfrost was never able to share what news Starclan had given to her in return to help her learn to interpret omens. Perhaps she wasn't allowed to say, or maybe Starclan didn't share dreams with her like they did with Goldenpaw.

"What is your message for Whitestar?" Goldenpaw asked hesitantly.

Softpetal's green star-lit eyes shined brightly. She stared straight at the young molly as she spoke, as if she was not speaking to the young she-cat but her soul.

"*Swiftness will fortify your ranks, but hurry, Snow's unyielding frost threatens to destroy the balance of the Land's Star*," meowed the starry medicine cat cryptically.

Goldenpaw took a step back. *A prophecy?* She never expected to receive one of those, they were so rare nowadays. *What could it all mean*, she wondered. Since Whitestar was the only cat she could talk to about this, perhaps the wise older molly could help Goldenpaw decode Starclan's message. With the prophecy delivered, Softpetal dipped her head and disappeared back into the mist. Not long after, the star filled world surrounding the young medicine cat slowly faded away.

The sight of the starry field was replaced with the rays of the rising sun seeping in through the entrance of the medicine cat's den, shining in Goldenpaw's eyes. The she-cat jumped up when she realized she was back in the waking world, her short ginger and white fur bristled from nerves. It took her a moment to regain her grip on reality before she relaxed. With composure regained, Goldenpaw silently crept past her sleeping mentor and out of the den, scurrying across the camp in a hurry to tell Whitestar about Starclan's message.

Allegiances

(***Cats with a * next to their gender are transgender***)

GRASSCLAN

Leader: Whitestar- chocolate point (Siamese) she-cat with a plumed tail and blue eyes

Deputy: Chicorynose- beautiful fawn she-cat with a plumed tail and pale green eyes (*Apprentice: Swiftpaw*)

Medicine Cats: Snowfrost- silver lynx point she-cat with a plumed tail and blue eyes

Goldensong- pale golden and white she-cat with a white spot on the bridge of her nose and pale green eyes (*Apprentice: Mistypaw*)

Code Keeper: (*a cat who keeps law and order*) Dewstone- white she-cat with silver patches and blue eyes

Warriors: (*fully trained cats without kits*)

Tigerfang- dark brown tabby tom* with amber eyes (*Apprentice: Shadowpaw*)

Snailear- white tom with ginger patches and mix matched eyes (one blue and one green)

Slugsnout- ginger and white tom with amber eyes

Waspwing- dark ginger tom with amber eyes (*Apprentice: Heatherpaw*)

Ambereye- pale ginger she-cat with amber eyes

Gingerstrike- ruddy ginger tom with amber eyes (*Apprentice: Rabbitpaw*)

Sheeptail- white tom with odd curly fur and blue eyes. He is hard of hearing (*Apprentice: Frostpaw*)

Cowpatch- white tom with cinnamon patches and green eyes

Ryestep- greyish- brown tom with amber eyes

Cloverpetal- calico she-cat with yellow-green eyes (*Apprentice: Quailpaw*)

Ladybugbite- white she-cat with small ginger and black calico spots on her back mostly near the base of her tail and on her tail, a white tail-tip, and amber eyes

Butterflytail- handsome pale brown tabby tom with hazel green eyes

Bumblethroat- pale brown tom with black tabby stripes and amber eyes

Beetlepatch- ginger and white tom with extra ginger patches and yellow eyes

Apprentices: (*cats 6 moons old or older in training*)

Quailpaw- pretty light brown tabby she-cat with darker stripes and brown eyes

Heatherpaw- lilac she-cat with brown eyes

Shadowpaw- black tom with green eyes

Swiftpaw - white she-cat with black patches, mix-matched colored legs (front right and back left are black and the others are white), blue eyes, and a nubby black tail [she's a purebred Japanese Bobtail]

Frostpaw- long-haired silver and white tabby she-cat with green eyes

Rabbitpaw- long haired grey lynx point tom with white toes and blue eyes

Mistypaw- long haired light silver she-cat with pale green eyes, medicine cat apprentice

Queens: (*cats who care for kits and give advice to the clan*)

Den Mother: (*"leader" of the queens*) Ashwhisker- Dilute tortoiseshell tom* with yellow-green eyes

Rosebloom- albino spotted she-cat with pale blue eyes (expecting Ryestep's kits)

Jaybird- silver tabby she-cat with blue eyes

Cricketsong- light brown tabby she-cat with yellow eyes (Mother of Cowpatch's kits: Tulipkit [cinnamon and white mollykit], Lilackit [white mollykit with fawn patches], Nectarkit [brown and white tabby mollykit], and Pollenkit [light brown tabby mollykit])

Elders: (*cats who have retired from their duties*)

Smokesnout- dull black tom with green eyes

Boulderfall- dark brown tom with a grey muzzle and green eyes

Tornface- white tom with a huge scar from the tip of his torn right ear to the bottom left of his chin

Meadowcall- dark ginger she-cat with yellow-green eyes

Poppycloud- dark ginger she-cat with orange eyes

TREECLAN

Leader: Blazestar- ginger and white tom with orange eyes (*Apprentice: Tigerpaw*)

Deputy: Thornberry- long haired blackish-brown tom with a nubby tail and yellow eyes

Medicine Cat: Mothsong- pretty calico she-cat with orange eyes and a ginger moth shaped patch on her white chest (*Apprentice: Berrypaw*)

Code Keeper: Cardinaltail- fluffy white tom with 2 ginger patches on his head, a fluffy ginger tail and odd eyes (one yellow and one blue) (*Apprentice: Deerpaw*)

Warriors:

Wolfheart- handsome long haired grey and white tom with green eyes (*Apprentice: Nightpaw*)

Leafheart- ginger and white she-cat with a ginger heart shaped patch on her white chest and green eyes (*Apprentice: Moonpaw*)

Brackentooth- dark tabby molly with amber eyes (*Apprentice: Foxpaw*)

Robinspots- spotted tom with yellow eyes (*Apprentice: Sunpaw*)

Shadeleaf- beautiful torbie she-cat with green eyes (*Apprentice: Smokepaw*)

Pepperpatch- white and black patched she cat with green eyes (*Apprentice: Magpiepaw*)

Bluefang- blue-grey tom with green eyes

Spruceleap- light brown tabby and white tom with amber eyes (*Apprentice: Fogpaw*)

Darkfire- chimera tortoiseshell she-cat with a half ginger half black face and amber eyes (*Apprentice: Adderpaw*)

Beetlenose- black spotted smoked tom with green eyes (*Apprentice: Leopardpaw*)

Shroompelt- white tom with dark brown tabby patches and yellow eyes (*Apprentice: Blackpaw*)

Sagetail- brown she-cat with siamese points and yellow eyes

Thrushmask- Light brown she-cat with siamese points and amber eyes (*Apprentice: Flamepaw*)

Galestorm- dark grey she-cat with lighter silver patches, chest and neck fur, and tail, white paws, and yellow-green eyes (*Apprentice: Beepaw*)

Greytuft- long-haired grey she-cat* with pale yellow eyes (*Apprentice: Tinypaw*)

Oakfur- long haired dark brown tom with fluffy lighter colored chest fur and amber eyes (*Apprentice: Meadowpaw*)

Flamepath- ginger she-cat with unusual blue eyes (*Apprentice: Emberpaw*)

Apprentices:

Fogpaw- long haired grey smoke tom with yellow eyes

Meadowpaw- golden she-cat with unusual blue eyes

Emberpaw- pretty dilute calico she-cat with yellow-green eyes

Leopardpaw- black spotted smoke tom with yellow eyes

Nightpaw- long haired black she-cat with fluffy neck fur and unusual blue eyes

Batpaw- long haired black she-cat with one blue eye and one green eye

Moonpaw- pretty long haired silver-grey and white she-cat with pale green eyes

Smokepaw- handsome long haired grey smoke tom with fluffy light grey neck fur and green eyes

Magpiepaw- long haired white and black patched she-cat with green eyes

Skunkpaw- unusual black and white tom with blue eyes

Adderpaw- ginger and white tom with orange eyes

Flamepaw- ginger tom with white underbelly and toes and orange

eyes

Foxpaw- ginger tom with a white patch on his chest and green eyes

Sunpaw- ginger and white tom with green eyes

Tigerpaw- beautiful long haired dark brown tabby and white she-cat with yellow eyes

Deerpaw- long-haired dark tabby tom with a white underbelly and toes and yellow eyes, code keeper's apprentice

Berrypaw- long haired dark tabby tom with yellow eyes, medicine cat apprentice

Tinypaw- dilute tortoiseshell she-cat with yellow eyes

Beepaw- long haired silver and black tabby she-cat with yellow eyes and a nubby tail

Blackpaw- long haired black tom with yellow eyes and a nubby tail

Queens:

Den Mother: Silverhawk- long haired silver tabby she-cat with black swirling stripes and yellow eyes (*Apprentice: Skunkpaw*)

Brightsky- white and black patched she-cat with unusual blue eyes

Mapleshine- calico she-cat with green eyes (mate of Brackentooth, mother of: Sleekkit [black and white tomkit], Honeykit [pale golden mollykit], and Peonykit [calico mollykit])

Elders:

Badgerface- once handsome black and white tom with orange eyes and a scarred muzzle

Elmfoot- tabby tom with white paws and amber eyes

Daisypetal- pale ginger she-cat

MOUNTAINCLAN

Leader: Fogstar- long haired silver tom with a dark grey tail and pale blue eyes

Deputy: Bearclaw- long haired smoke black tom with orange eyes

Medicine Cat: Hawkfern- long haired, mostly grey dilute tortoiseshell she-cat with orange eyes

Code Keeper: Rockfall- long haired dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Warriors:

Frozenflight- long haired white tom with pale green eyes

Needlethorn- long haired pale tabby tom with yellow eyes

Galecall- long haired black and white she-cat with yellow-green eyes (*Apprentice: Cougarpaw*)

Jaggedtalon- dark brown long haired tom with lighter chest fur, a white spot in the middle of his chest, and amber eyes

Alderwing- long haired mostly brown and black tortoiseshell she-cat with yellow-green eyes

Icefeather- long haired white she-cat with blue eyes. she is mostly deaf and mute

Shrubdapple long haired white tom with splashes of brown on his pelt and blue eyes. he is blind

Badgerstorm- black and white long haired tom with a white stripe splitting the middle of his face and yellow-green eyes

Lizardtail- long haired grey and white tom with brown eyes

Blizzardtooth- long haired silver tabby tom with green eyes

Ebonymask- long haired black she-cat with amber eyes (*Apprentice: Foxpaw*)

Kestrelshine- long haired dark brown and white she-cat with amber

eyes

Dustpuddle- long haired brown tom with amber eyes

Slatestep-long haired pure black tom with orange eyes

Spiderfang- long haired dusty black she-cat with an underbite and amber eyes

Adderstrike- long haired dark brown tabby tom with a white chest and one amber eye and one blue eye

Briarleaf- long haired brown tabby and white she-cat with yellow-green eyes

Toadsong- long haired grey tom with yellow eyes

Twigbelly- long haired dusty brown tom with amber eyes

Lightningstrike- long haired grey she-cat with orange eyes, a white chest, and an odd white lightning shaped fur marking going diagonally from the top left of her head down to the bottom right of her chin connecting with her chest fur

Shrewnose- long haired smokey black tom with yellow-green eyes and a white spot on the bridge of his nose

Ravencall- black and white long haired she-cat with green eyes

Breezeheart- long haired white molly with her tail and half her face a light brown color and blue eyes (*Apprentice: Pinepaw*)

Talonstrike-aging long haired siamese tom with blue eyes

Apprentices:

Cougarpaw- long haired light brown tabby tom with yellow eyes

Foxpaw- dusty brown long haired tom with a white muzzle and amber eyes

Pinepaw- light brown she-cat with amber eyes

Queens:

Den Mother: Vulturetuft- long haired white she-cat* with brown patches and amber eyes (Foster Mother of Skykit [long haired silver and white mollykit])

Curlflower- long haired lavender she-cat with folded ears and yellow eyes (Mother of Fogstar's kit: Dark-kit [long haired dark grey and white tomkit])

Spottedear- mostly black tortoiseshell she-cat with orange eyes (Mother of Rockfall's kit: Eaglekit [mostly black long haired tortoiseshell mollykit]

Elders:

Cheetawhisker- long hair spotted tabby she-cat with tufts on her ears, a greying muzzle, and one brown eye (the other is missing)

Caracaltuft- long hair light brown tom with tufts on his ears, a greying muzzle, and brown eyes

OCEANCLAN

Leader: Wavestar- long haired grey tabby tom with white chest fur, front paws, and back legs and yellow eyes

Deputy: Sandybreeze- long haired golden she-cat with orange eyes (*Apprentice: Hazepaw*)

Medicine Cat: Curlear- sickly hairless tom with greyish-pink fuzz/ skin and yellow eyes (*Apprentice: Bluesky*)

Code Keeper: Sharktooth- black and white tom with green eyes

Warriors:
Eelnose- long haired ginger and white she-cat with yellow eyes

Sandclaw- handsome pale golden tom with a plumed tail and yellow-green eyes

Minnowjaw- long haired brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Kinkfoot- long haired brown tabby she-cat with yellow eyes and a twisted back paw (*Apprentice: Otterpaw*)

Shellsplash- brown tabby she-cat with green eyes

Duneshine- long haired mostly ginger tortoiseshell tabby tom* with amber eyes

Ripplesnout- dark brown tabby tom with dark green eyes (*Apprentice: Shimmerpaw*)

Puddlefur- long haired black and white tom with yellow eyes

Scallopfall- dark ginger and white tom with amber eyes (*Apprentice: Stonepaw*)

Troutwhisker- long haired grey smoke she-cat with amber eyes

Silverdrop- silver black spotted tabby she-cat with blue eyes (*Apprentice: Urchinpaw*)

Bellapool- dark brown tabby she-cat with a sliced ear and green eyes (*Apprentice: Precious*)

Luckysong- white and orange patched tom with blue eyes (*Apprentice: Whisperpaw*)

Gullcry- grey and white tom with amber eyes

Seaweedfang- fluffy brown tabby she-cat with an injured front paw and amber eyes (*Apprentice: Samson*)

Splashcreek- blue-grey tom with yellow-green eyes

Dimpath- pretty pale ginger she-cat with a snaggletooth and brown eyes

Lilypad- pretty white and brown dappled she-cat with blue eyes

Finnclaw- silver tom with black spots and brown eyes

Driftbreath- brown tom with black spots and brown eyes (*Apprentice: Currentpaw*)

Clamleg- long haired grey tabby tom with orange eyes

Apprentices:

Hazepaw- long haired pure white tom with yellow eyes

Precious- marbled siamese she-cat with blue eyes

Samson- long haired dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Shimmerpaw- black smoke she-cat with yellow eyes

Urchinpaw- black tom with yellow-green eyes

Otterpaw- lithe brown she-cat with yellow eyes, formerly of Grassclan

Whisperpaw- dark grey tabby she-cat with lighter chest fur, a folded ear and yellow eyes

Currentpaw- long haired white tom with a grey tabby patch on his forehead, a silver tabby tail, and yellow eyes

Stonepaw- white and dark grey tabby patched she-cat with yellow eyes

Bluesky- blue-grey tom with blue eyes, medicine cat apprentice

Queens:

Den Mother: Richfur- pale ginger tom with orange eyes (mate of Duneshine, father of: (Rustykit [ginger tomkit], Gillkit [white and ginger patched tom with green eyes], and Minniekit [ginger mollykit]

Beckycreek- dark grey and white tabby she-cat with yellow-green eyes (Mother of Luckysong's kits: Duck-kit [silver grey tabby mollykit*] and Turtlekit [torbie mollykit])

Sunnystream- white and ginger patched she-cat with orange eyes (Mother of Gullycry's kits: Saltkit [white and grey patched tomkit] and Pepperkit [mostly white calico mollykit], and Spicekit [white

and ginger patched tomkit])

Elders:

Tunafin- silver tabby tom with yellow eyes

Dolphintail- blind grey molly with foggy yellow eyes

Oystersplash- long haired grey tabby tom with amber eyes and a half tail

Chloe- pale ginger she-cat with white paws and yellow eyes

MARSHCLAN

Leader: Littlestar- old, mostly brown tabby tortoiseshell tom* with short legs and amber eyes

Deputy: Brightbounce-beautiful flame point she-cat with blue eyes

Medicine Cat: Swanface- siamese she-cat with blue eyes

Code Keeper: Swallowtail- brown and white tom with orange eyes

Warriors:

Morningrose- beautiful pale golden tabby she-cat with white toes and chest fur and brown eyes (*Apprentice: Stempaw*)

Pricklethorn- brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Mudsplash- mostly brown tortoiseshell and white molly with amber eyes (*Apprentice: Sedgepaw*)

Frogfrost- brown tabby she-cat with brown eyes

Cranetooth- white and brown tabby patched tom with brown eyes

Gooseflight- dark brown spotted tabby tom with white chest fur, underbelly, and toes and brown eyes

Snake-eye- dark brown tabby she-cat with one amber eye (the other is permanently closed due to a snake bite) (*Apprentice: Spiderpaw*)

Violetpool- pale ginger and white patched she-cat with green eyes

Reedstorm- grey tabby tom with green eyes

Fernfeather- calico she-cat with green eyes

Apprentices:

Spiderpaw- - brown smoke tom with a white chest and paws and yellow eyes

Stempaw- dark grey tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Sedgepaw- black spotted tom with a lighter underbelly and amber eyes

Queens:

Den Mother: Lotusfang- pure white she-cat with black patches and brown eyes

Hemlockshade- silver and white she-cat with yellow-green eyes (Mother of Pricklethorn's kits: Willowkit [blue-grey mollykit] and Dragonflykit [brown tabby tom with darker brown stripes])

Littlebird- golden and white patched she-cat with brown eyes (Mother of an unkonw tom's kits: Hummingkit [ginger and white mollykit] and Cherrykit [cream colored mollykit])

Elders:

Flyear- black tom with a white chin, chest fur, and paws, and yellow eyes

Lionclaw- once handsome golden tabby tom with brown eyes

Loonfoot-mostly black tom with a white underbelly and paws and pale yellow eyes

Toadwhisker- brown tabby tom with green eyes. He is half deaf

CATS OUTSIDE THE CLANS

Max- Purebred Savannah (F6) tom with amber eyes and a black leather collar

Gem- Purebred American Curl she-cat. Has a ginger and white pelt, orange eyes, and a light blue collar

Oliver- Purebred sorrel Somali tom with amber eyes and a purple collar. Flower's littermate

Flower- Purebred blue Somali she-cat with amber eyes and a pink collar. Oliver's littermate.

Mako- white tom with a black patch on his head, a fully black tail, and grey-blue eyes. Lives in the barn on Grassclan territory

Ruby- Purebred albino Savannah (F2) she-cat with pale blue eyes

Tabitha- Purebred British Shorthair she-cat. She is a thick cinnamon and white classic tabby with yellow eyes, no claws, and a green rhinestone collar

Fat Louie- Purebred British Shorthair tom. He is overweight with a chocolate and white pelt and orange eyes

Chapter 1

[image]

Bright green grass littered meadowy hills as far as the eye could see. The bright blue sky shined above with no clouds in sight, seeming to enhance the vivid greenery around black and white mix-matched paws. Vibrant pigments of pink, blue, and yellow flowers dotted the area adding splashes of color to the plush meadow. A warm Greenleaf breeze blew through the grass and swirled around soft white and black patched fur gently, pulling scents of nectar, prey, and freshness towards a small pink nose. It was so serene here, so peaceful. Not a sound could be heard; for a moment the world was trapped in a bubble of pure silence. A cat could live in a place like this forever.
Black ears perked as a voice could suddenly be heard carried on the wind, just as soft as the breeze itself.
"Swift-" called the voice in a hushed tone. What could that be? Who could that be? The world fell into silence for another moment before the voice called again. It was a bit louder this time, yet still so beautiful, inviting even.
"Swift-!"
The small white and black patched feline stepped forward, moving towards the voice without thinking, her black ears perked, trained on the sound. It was definitely calling her, even if that wasn't a name she recognized. What could the disembodied voice want...?

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The sound of a loud wooden creak caused the young cat to suddenly jolt awake, torn away from her heavenly dream. Her head quickly shot up to look in the direction of the noise, ears fully erect. It was only the door being opened. Following the sound came the young cat's housefolk, walking clumsily across the dark hardwood floor of the main den area. The young molly relaxed and rose to her paws, leaning back on her haunches to stretch and let out a huge yawn. Drowsily she stepped out of her nest, padding over to rub up against her owner with a loud meow in greetings; the black nub she called a tail held high to welcome the housefolk warmly. The metal

identification tags attached to her crimson collar jingled against each other as she moved around and tilted her head back to look up at the giant creature.
"Hana~" It cooed her name, reaching down to pet the white and black patched she-cat. Hana let out a loud purr for her owner to hear, *housefolk have notoriously bad hearing*. The young she-cat arched into the creature's strange, warm touch. In a moment she found herself being hoisted far from the ground, held in long lanky limbs. The housefolk walked with the feline in its arms towards another door, thumping its feet loudly on the floor as it trudged around. With ease the door was opened, allowing blinding sunlight to come pouring in to greet them. Hana blinked a few times to allow her eyes to adjust to the sudden change in light. The housefolk stepped out into the open long enough to gently put the little nubby tailed she-cat onto the brown, half-dead grass. It gave her another pet, murmuring something that could not be understood before retreating back inside its den. It was always difficult to communicate with the large creature, perhaps Hana should try harder to teach her housefolk Catspeak.
Happy to be out in the fresh air, the molly trotted across the yard, appreciating the scenery of her territory. She took notice of the bird bath which stood in the center of the yard bombarded by twittering sparrows, and the flower patch which lined along the fence with freshly planted blossoms. Hana recalled sitting with her housefolk a few days ago, watching as it dug up last year's dead stems, replacing them with new flowers already fully bloomed. The young molly wondered how her housefolk managed to find flowers which were already in bloom so early into Newleaf.
Once she had reached the end of the yard, Hana leaped up onto the white picket fence which marked the end of her boundary. She sat down, closing her eyes for a moment to better feel the fresh Newleaf breeze blow through her whiskers, dodging around the edges of the crimson red collar that hung uncomfortably around her throat. She was in the mood for some peace today.

"Hiya, Hana!" A voice caterwauled from across the way. Hana's eyes flicked open to look at the cat who had called for her. In her sights was a huge cat with brown and black spotted fur, a black leather collar hanging loosely around his neck. Hana flinched for a moment, startled by the other cat's sudden presence, but

immediately relaxed. This cat always caught her by surprise. He looked like one of those ferocious big cats she'd seen on the moving vision box a few times while sitting with her housefolk. But this large tom was anything but ferocious.

"Hi, Max," Hana meowed in reply, looking down at the larger cat prowling towards her across the dusty path.

"Beautiful morning, isn't it?" Max purred, joining her up on top of the fence with a mighty, effortless leap.

"It sure is!" Another voice unexpectedly chimed in from their left. Crossing over the fences that lined up evenly from den to den, came a ginger and white tabby she-cat with odd backward curled ears. The tiny pink bell on her light blue collar tinkled lightly as she took clumsy short hops from fence post to fence post to join her friends in front of Hana's yard. Hana sighed quietly to herself. *So much for a quiet, peaceful morning.*

"Nice to see you outside today, Gem," she mewed to the new molly with slight sarcasm in her tone. "It's been a couple days since we've seen you."

"Ugh, I know," Gem griped with a soft sigh. She lowered her odd shaped ears slightly as she spoke. "But I couldn't just leave my housefolk alone in the den with their new kit. Those two don't know how to care for it properly, I swear! They bound it's limbs together in a pelt as if that'll keep it safe and warm. I had to lay with it every time it would wail just to get the poor thing to settle down."

"Sounds like a lot of hard work," Max commented, grooming himself absentmindedly as they talked.

"Oh it is! But I'm so lucky to have a break. Today they took it out with them when they let me outside. Though I am a bit worried, I hope the kit will be alright without me."

"I'm sure it is. How do you think housefolk live so long if they don't take care of their kits properly?" Max asked, letting out a small chuckle.

"Hush!" Gem hissed playfully, swatting up at Max's nose, missing by a whisker. Max couldn't help let out a little *mrrrow* of laughter at the failed attempt of attack. Hana just rolled her eyes, looking over into the yard towards her right as she heard something stir from the den next door. Out of the door held open by another housefolk walked two kittens. One had a brilliant sorrel ginger pelt and a purple collar, while the other had bluish-fawn fur and a pink collar. Both cats bounded towards the fence together, leaping up on it in unison and walked to the corner post.

"Hey guys!" The sorrel tom mewed to his friends. The other two cats turned their heads to look at the littermates.

"Hello, Oliver, Hello, Flower!" Purred Hana warmly.

"Hey, Hana!" Chirped the bluish-fawn molly. "And Max, and Gem. How are you?"
The two other housecats nodded as if to say they were alright.

"I'm well, I think..." Hana replied. Flower tilted her head.

"What do you mean?" She asked curiously.

"Well..." Hana mumbled, lowering her gaze to the ground, her eyes unfocused from fatigue. "...I haven't been sleeping well for the past half moon. I keep having weird dreams."

"Oh? About what?"

"The meadow...something keeps calling me there," she confessed, shaking her head and turning her blue gaze back onto her friend. "But that's silly, right?"

"I don't think so!" Flower purred. "It could be sign. It'd be nice to explore there. Maybe you should go?" She suggested. Hana thought for a moment. Maybe visiting the meadow would be good for her. It might help her clear her head or at least help to satisfy her strange dreams and put them to rest.

"Yeah. Yeah maybe I will!" Hana meowed.

"Are you crazy?!" Shrieked Gem suddenly. The other cats turned

their heads to look at the ginger and white she-cat, puzzled. "It's too dangerous to go out there!"

"Why? Afraid a sparrow will swoop down at me?" Hana joked, causing the other cats to snicker.

"No! Haven't you heard, Hana? There's huge scary wildc ats who live out there!" Gem crouched down, making herself small on the fence post.

"Wild cats? I think you've been watching the moving vision box too much, Gem," Oliver remarked, flicking his ear dismissively.

"It's true," Max confirmed with a firm nod of his head. "I've spotted some wild cats a couple of times on my walks with my housefolk. I see them coming and going from the meadow and the forest. They're kinda scruffy and scrawny looking, a few have some scars."

"Really?" Hana queried, her curiosity piqued.

"Yeah, from all the fighting they do! They're vicious and cruel. I heard they hunt animals like squirrels and rabbits, attack each other over nothing, and let their kits play with the bones of their slaughtered enemies!" Squeaked Gem, amber eyes wide with fear. "And what's worse, they kill all cats who aren't apart of their little gang. I once heard of a house cat who wandered into the woods one day, and he was never seen again..."

"That's ridiculous, Gem, and you know it!" Groaned Hana in annoyance, hopping down from the fence onto the dusty path on the outside of her yard. "I'll prove it! Besides, a couple of mangy strays won't scare me so easily." she boasted, lifting her muzzle in the air snobbishly. The other cats gasped, but none looked more worried than fluffy little Gem, who seemed to have grown double her size from her fur which stood on end. Her amber eyes met with Hana's beautiful blues, shining with concern.

"Hana, yo..you don't understand," she stuttered. Hana blinked at Gem slowly.

"Maybe not, but I want to." She lifted her chin, casting her gaze on

the edge of the dusty path, her mind wondering about the mysteries beyond her neighborhood.
"I'll be fine," she assured with emphasis in her mew. "I won't be gone long!" She promised as she darted off in the direction of the meadow, her nubby black tail sticking up in the air with determination as she ran around the corner and out of sight.

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The strangely familiar feeling of long green grass tingled Hana's mix-matched paws as she stepped into the meadow. She walked far into the open grassy field, but not far enough to lose her way. In a small clearing only a foxlength and a half large she froze for a moment, shutting her eyes. Her dreams were starting to come back to her again. They were pretty much reality now, now that she thought about it. The only exceptions were that the breeze had a slight Newleaf chill in it, and Hana was not met with the warm welcoming voice calling out at her. It took the young she-cat a minute before she snapped herself back into reality. Her eyes fluttered open, turning towards the bright blue sky. A few cloud obstructed the view, but otherwise it was a perfectly sunny day. Suddenly Hana began to leap around in a circle excitedly like an overjoyed rabbit, letting out a small "woohoo!" and a giddy laugh. She started to bounce and run around the clearing, weaving in and out of the grass just like a deer, sniffing her surroundings as she went. The feeling of freedom was exhilarating, even if it was only temporary. Hana sniffed some early bloomed dandelions, the grass, the air, everything. She wanted to drink in all the meadow had to offer.
All of a sudden as she sniffed, Hana caught something strange on the wind. She stopped her gleeful play and froze in place perplexed, trying to figure out what it was. The young she-cat parted her jaws to taste the air to see what she could pick up with her dull, untrained senses. She strained herself, breathing in deeply to draw in the scent. It smelled so familiar. The scent was...cat!

Chapter 2

[image]

Before there was time to react, Hana felt an unexpected weight slam against her side, throwing her to the ground with a dull thud. She was in shock, her body froze in place in the sandy clearing. She was unsure if she should flee or fight back, but she was no coward. Quickly, Hana rose to her paws and got into an awkward fighting stance, legs spread wide and head lowered defensively. Her white and black patched fur bristled with fear and determination as she trained her eyes on the enemy. She unsheathed her claws, drawing her lips back in a snarl to try and look threatening. She'd seen cats do this on the moving vision box when they'd get into a fight, and hoped it would work the same for her.
Straining her eyes to see across the clearing, Hana was able to make out the shape opposite of her, watching her with narrowed interested eyes. She opened her jaws to taste the air and scent the stranger. She knew she wouldn't know this cat, but it would come in handy in case they'd meet again. The stranger, a tom, leapt out without warning onto Hana, landing on her back with his claws unsheathed. Hana yelped, feeling the cat's needle like claws rake across her hide, the wound he created burning like fire. She thrashed about violently, trying to throw the cat off. For a moment it seemed as if the cat would keep his hold on her forever, until Hana came up with an idea. She stood up on her hind legs, flipping onto her back to slam the other cat to the ground with all of her body weight. The opposing tom yowled in surprise, releasing his grip and fell limp under the she-cat. Immediately, Hana jumped back on her paws, turning tail to face her opponent while standing on tip-toe. Her muscles rippled and her limbs felt supercharged, though the scratches that the tom had left on her back and flank stung like crazy. But Hana wasn't about to back down because of a couple flesh wounds, not if the other cat was going to attack her again.
The other cat rolled onto his belly. He sat in a proper hunting crouch about a fox length away, not taking his eyes off the enemy she-cat. He seemed ready to pounce again, and Hana braced herself

in case he did, dropping back into her awkward stance. The strange kitten studied Hana a moment curiously before letting out a small chuckle, relaxing himself. He stood up on his long lanky legs, taking a step closer into view. For the first time, Hana was able to get a good look at a real wildcat. He was about her size, though less stocky; in fact this cat was outright lanky. He had a small head with a long pronounced muzzle, and his eyes-green as the meadow grass-were striking against his thin, pure black coat which shined in the sunlight handsomely.

"Relax, kittypet," the strange tom purred, the tip of his tail twitching with amusement. Hana tilted her head sheathing her claws, but remained poised for attack. The tom's sudden shift in behavior was surprising. Perhaps it was some sort of trick.

"How can I? You're one of those wildcats! If I let my guard down, you'll attack me again. Maybe even kill me!" Hana spat, her teeth bared threateningly.

"A warrior doesn't need to kill to win a battle," the tom explained, as if echoing someone else's words. He stepped back to give her some space, sitting down a tail-length away from his previous spot, wrapping his long skinny tail around his paws neatly.

"Is that what you are? A warrior..?" the scared molly asked hesitantly, receiving a *mrrow* of laughter from the tom in reply.

"You really think *I'm* a warrior?" He laughed. "I haven't even been an apprentice for more than a moon yet!"
Hana felt heat rise in her pelt; was this cat mocking her for her ignorance of wildcat culture?

"What's that mean?" she queried.

"It means I'm in training to be one," the tom informed her, grooming himself nonchalantly. "One day I'll be made a warrior, but not for another couple of seasons."

"Well how was I supposed to know?" Hana huffed, beginning to relax. She sat down, giving her shoulder a couple of licks to calm her nerves, her fur still pricked.

"It's ok, I don't expect a kittypet to know anything about the ways of the clan," the black tom mewed. Some of the things the stranger was talking about didn't make much sense, and it made Hana curious.

"Clan?" She echoed. The tom rolled his eyes.

"A clan is large group of cats that live and share prey together. We're all kinda like a big family. There are 5 clans in existence as far as any cat knows," The tom began to explain, joy shining in his eyes. "I'm a member of Grassclan, the best and biggest group to ever exist! This whole meadow is our territory."
Hana couldn't believe the entire meadow was home to a whole clan. She tried to imagine all the cats that must live nearby with the strange kitten. How hadn't she known about the wildcats if there was so many that hunted in the area? Perhaps she really was that ignorant.
"I don't expect a kittypet to understand though," the tom emphasized once again.

"Why do you keep calling me that? Whats a kittypet?" Hana mewed in question.

"Wow you *really* don't know anything, do you? That's what you are. A cat that's owned by those tall, hairless creatures and lives a life of softness in Twolegplace. That collar you're wearing gives it away," replied the black tom.
What was so wrong with wearing a collar? Hana's housefolk had given it to her because it loved her so much. Sure the thing was uncomfortable, but her housefolk put it on her so she could always be brought home in case she were to get lost.

"There-there isn't anything wrong with my collar!" Hana snapped defensively, ever so slightly hesitant. She may not be the happiest as a "kittypet", but she wouldn't let some scrawny stray tell her that it was wrong to live the way she did while he lived out here looking half starved.
"Maybe if you had housefolk you'd understand what it means." Hana looked at him expectantly, secretly hoping he'd give it a try. Her tone was a bit mocking as she spoke, hoping the recycling of certain words would catch the tom's attention. Despite the way he spoke to

her, Hana could see herself getting along with this cat. Maybe they could learn to be friends. Instead, her words ended up causing the tom to wrinkle his nose in distaste. He looked at the little molly like she was insane.

"Twolegs are the worst, I'd rather die than be a kittypet!" He hissed. "Those freaky creatures basically enslave cats. You can only eat when they let you, sleep when they're not bothering you, run and play when they aren't yowling at you to stop. You can't even go outside whenever you want. What kind of life is that?" The black tom continued, sounding disgusted. Hana hadn't thought about her life that way before. It's not like she'd ever known anything else; she never thought it was so bad even if she was a bit unhappy. "But being a clan cat is amazing. You get to be a warrior, and fight and defend your friends, family, and territory with valiance. Clan cats can do whatever we want on our land, and nobody can stop us. Out in the wild, a cat is truly free." The tom fluffed up his chest with an air of pride about him, as if his freedom made him better than the kittypet she-cat. Hana listened intently to the tom compare her life to his, and she realized that he was right. The life of a warrior sounded far more fulfilling than being a house cat.
Hana saw the tom's ear turn to the side. His head shot up in the direction he was listening to a moment ago, letting out a small "uh oh" under his breath. His expression changed to that of worry, fur along his spine prickling. The tom rose to his paws, approaching Hana. Gently he nudged her with his shoulder, urging her to leave. Hana, however, didn't want to budge. She turned her attention in the same direction to see what had caused the tom to become so worried.

"What's going on here?" A new voice caterwauled out of seemingly nowhere. Hana jolted, jumping to her feet out of instinct. *So that's why he's acting like a frightened mouse*, she thought. She wondered why she hadn't caught the new cat's scent like she did the other's, realizing that the winds must have shifted as they were talking. Maybe it was a trick after all, and the tom was only trying to distract Hana to get her to drop her guard. But that couldn't be the case. The tom tried to help her escape before the other cat arrived, so his intentions must have been innocent after all.

"Oh, Tigerfang!" The black tom answered nervously, bounding towards the cat who now stepped into view. Hana felt her heart begin to race. This new cat was big, much bigger than she was comfortable with. She was afraid of being attacked by the towering cat who had emerged and readied herself to flee. Just like the young tom was trying to get her to do before.
The black kitten met with the other cat and touched noses with them happily, glancing at Hana with worry showing in his eyes. This new cat, Tigerfang, was clearly older and much larger than the tom was. In fact, they were one of the tallest cats Hana had ever seen, next to Max. Their dark brown pelt was striking especially with those brilliant black tabby stripes. Their yellow-green eyes showed softness for the young black tom as the two idly chatted for a moment between themselves. Hana wondered if they were related.

"You were supposed to chase off the kittypet, Shadowpaw, not discuss our whole way of life with her," Tigerfang remarked, cuffing the black tom, Shadowpaw, on the ear playfully. Their voice was high pitched like a molly's, filled with amusement.

"I know. But I've never met a kittypet before, especially one that's first instinct was to fight and not run away like a frightened rabbit," Shadowpaw replied, lowering his ears slightly in embarrassment. Tigerfang purred and gave him a swift, reassuring lick between the ears.
"This is my mentor, Tigerfang." Shadowpaw turned to Hana, introducing them. "He's the one who's training me to be a warrior." Tigerfang gave her a nod, looking at the small she-cat with interest.

"Hello, kittypet," he purred. "I'm surprised you didn't run off upon my arrival."

"I did..didn't know you were c-coming..." Hana stammered nervously, her body trembling slightly. Tigerfang examined her, twitching his nose. He let out an knowledgeable "hmm", causing Hana to worry. Shadowpaw seemed to stiffen as well, but was instantly reassured when his mentor rested his tail on the young tom's shoulders.

"The winds weren't on your side this time, I'm afraid. But don't

worry, I'm not going to attack you like my apprentice did," Tigerfang assured. Hana bowed her head to him slightly in thanks, still a bit on edge. She let out a shaky breath before standing upright once more.
A rustle in the nearby grass caught the three cats' attention as they spoke. Out of a tussock emerged a third clan cat gracefully. When she arrived, the two toms dipped their heads respectfully to her, and Hana decided to do the same. With her head still bowed, the young she-cat glanced up at the newest arrival to the clearing. This time it was definitely a molly, with beautiful siamese fur complete with the signature baby blue eyes. She has a regal air about her, with body language which demanded respect.

"Greetings, Whitestar," meowed Tigerfang in a warm tone, tail raising over his back in greetings.

"Who's that?" Hana asked Shadowpaw as she moved herself closer to him, dropping her voice to a whisper.

"That's Whitestar, she's our leader. She's also Tigerfang's mate," Shadowpaw whispered back.
Whitestar approached, settling herself next to Tigerfang with her plumed tail wrapped neatly around her paws. Her attention turned to the young molly in front of her.

"You're quite the tenacious little kit, aren't you?" She meowed humorously to Hana who simply replied with a nervous chuckle.
Her voice sounds so familiar. Have we met before? Or..is she the one? The voice from the dream?
"You defended yourself well against young Shadowpaw here. Although he's a more knowledgeable opponent, you did not back down for a second. Well done." She continued with a purr.

"You were watching?" Hana asked. Whitestar responded with a curt nod, a sweet smile spreading on her pretty siamese face. Hana puffed her chest out with pride.
"Well, thank you, miss Whitestar. That means a lot coming from someone like you, I guess. It must be amazing to be in your clan, from what Shadowpaw told me. Yet alone leading it! Is it hard? Do you all hunt together? Is your clan really the biggest?" Hana mewed with exhilaration, spilling out questions like water running off a

cliff. Whitestar chuckled.

"It can be difficult at times to take care of the clan, but it is very rewarding," Whitestar began. "Warriors and apprentices are the ones who hunt to feed the elders, queens, kits, and themselves of course. Though queens enjoy hunting on occasion. And no, though we are one the biggest clans in The Land's Star, we are not the biggest of all. Leafbare has hurt us greatly this year. Luckily, Newleaf promises to bring better fortune with kits," she answered.

"Could you explain that stuff a little more..?" Hana requested bashfully. Shadowpaw snickered.

"The Land's Star is what we call the five clans combined; its the name Starclan chose. Elders are old cats who have retired from their clan duties. Queens are cats who take care of kits and give advice to their clanmates," he informed her without pause.

"Starclan..? Is that one of the five clans?"

"Starclan isn't a physical clan, kittypet. They're a clan of heavenly warriors, our warrior ancestors, who watch over us. You can see them when you look up at night in Silverpelt, which is the band of stars that hangs in the sky," Shadowpaw answered once more.

"So if you guys are so obsessed with warriors, does that mean everyone in the clan gets to be a warrior?" For a heartbeat, Hana worried her questioning might become tedious. But she was so fascinated by the strange ways that wildcats lived by, she couldn't help but wonder about everything. *Wait until the cats back home hear about all of this!*

"Every cat is allowed the opportunity. Though some are too young to start training. While others are too busy caring for kits or have grown too old to act as warriors," Tigerfang added.

"You could have the same opportunity as the others," Whitestar interjected. "Perhaps it would be more beneficial for all of us if you join Grassclan and find out everything for yourself. We could use the extra paws."
Hana gasped, her eyes growing wide. For a moment she was frozen

in place, unaware of how to react to the offer. Could she really leave her housefolk and all of her friends behind to live out here with the wildcats of the meadow?

"If you do choose to join us, you will train alongside Shadowpaw to become a warrior," Tigerfang pointed out, "But I warn you, living among the clan will not be as easy and fun as he's made it out to be. Fighting is a common occurrence. Food can become scarce during the colder seasons, and there is no artificial heat in the meadow to warm your nest at night. Leafbare is an especially cruel time out here, since there is little cover to protect against the icy winds and bitter cold snow."

"You will also be expected to help hunt for the many who live in the clan, even when you have barely eaten yourself." Whitestar continued for her mate. "But the rewards are great. You will grow up in Grassclan and learn the ways of a wildborn cat. You will go on many quests and fight many battles for honor and the sake of the clan and the ones you love. You will forever feel the support and strength of your clanmates residing with you, even when you are all alone. That is what being a clan cat is truly about."
Hana felt her fur prickle with excitement as she listened to the clan leader speak. Her paws kneaded at the soft earth of the clearing as she imagined all of the thrills and adventures she could have as a clan cat.
"Know now, young cat, if you should choose to join us you must respect our way of life. But if you decide not to join us, you must leave now and never return to the meadow. A cat cannot live the life of two," warned Whitestar, seriousness coating her lovely voice.
Hana's head felt fuzzy as she tried to process all that she had been told. There were so many cons to living out in the wilderness; the elements, starvation, predators. Any other housecat would hear those risks and turn tail, running back home to the safety of their housefolk. But Hana took the time to weigh those cons against the positives.

"I think..." She began to speak, hesitating as she glanced at the eyes which were upon her. "I need more time to think. Do I have to give an answer right now?" she finally responded.
The two older cats exchanged looks before nodding at one another,

turning their attention back to Hana.

"We will give you until sundown tomorrow to make a decision. I will be waiting for you here if you should decide to come," replied Tigerfang. Hana dipped her head respectfully.

"Thank you. I appreciate it," she meowed, looking up at the three cats with gratitude. All three smiled at her warmly, turning tail to head for home. The two older cats began to pad off into the grass, tails intertwined. Shadowpaw, however, stayed behind for a moment more.

"By the way, kittypet, what's your name?"

"H-" Hana cut herself off, thinking for a moment. Suddenly the voice from her dream came to mind. Her eyes shined, and she lifted her chin proudly. "Swift. My name is Swift."

"Well, Swift, I hope we can get the chance train together. You're one tough bunny." Shadowpaw flicked her ear playfully with the tip of his tail, letting out a small chuckle. Swift smiled at him shyly, watching as the black tom trotted away to catch up with his mentor and leader, waving his tail as a farewell just as he disappeared into the tall green grass.

Chapter 3

[image]

The trek homeward felt as if it took forever. Hana found herself to be completely distracted during the journey. Her mind was racing, replaying the scene that had unfolded out in the meadow. She kept thinking about the group of wildcats-no...clan cats-that she had met only heartbeats ago. It was amazing to run into them. Originally Hana hadn't expected to run into any cats. And if she had, she'd certainly thought they'd be different, meaner even. Sure she was attacked, but she was sure that the clan cats would kill her just like Gem had warned they would. But to her surprise, they were nice, and interesting to chat with to say the least. Learning about them, and receiving the offer to live with them was the opportunity of a lifetime. Speaking with the clan cats had opened Hana's eyes to how blind she was living in town-Twolegplace. But she couldn't just abandon her life so easily. She had friends there, cats who cared about her and loved her just as much as she loved them. Could she really leave them all behind?

Hana sighed deeply and looked up at the sky as if it would give her the answers she needed. The sun was nearly set now, the first stars of the night-and Silverpelt-began to make their prescene known. Were those really warrior cat ancestors up there? Hana recalled her dreams, dreams she had been having for the past half moon, and even earlier than that. She remembered one in particular from when she was two moons old. She recalled a few starry beings appearing in front of her, whispering in her ear and bringing her hope. Hope of what? *Freedom...* Could they have been clan ancestors? No, that was ridiculous. Why would a bunch of dead cats from a clan she didn't even belong to come to her?

Hana shook her head as she realized how late it was getting. Her housefolk-Twoleg-would be worried sick about her if she didn't hurry back to the neighborhood. Hana sprinted the rest of the way home, hearing her kittypet name being called as she turned the corner onto her block. She meowed a loud greeting as she hopped over the white picket fence, and bounded towards her Twoleg who stood waiting for her in the yard by the door. The Twoleg bent

down to pet her gently as it always did. Once it was done, Hana headed inside, making her way to her nest. She stepped in, walked in a circle for a moment, then laid down with her legs tucked under herself, closing her eyes.

When she opened them again, she was back in the meadow, a warm Greenleaf breeze blowing through her white and black patched pelt just like before. This time she was free of her kittypet collar, free of any care in the world. Hana heard her new name being called, and she happily replied back this time, her voice traveling on the wind.

"I'm here!" She yowled joyously, leaping through the grass towards the voice.
Almost instantly the majestic shape of Whitestar materialized in front of her, gazing down upon her with pride and admiration. The leader's shadow loomed in front of the younger molly, a dozen or more pairs of glowing eyes appearing inside to stare at Hana.

"Welcone home." Whitestar purred in her lovely, soothing voice that seemed so familiar now. The eyes in the shadow broke out into a chant, yowling Hana's new, chosen name. Quickly they disappeared as the sun began to shine brighter upon them from behind Whitestar's majestic head. Before Hana knew it, the whole world had become engulfed in an infinite white light.

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Hana blinked open her eyes to be greeted by the morning sun shining in her face from the window. After the dream she had last night, she had finally made her decision. The small molly stood up in her nest with a grunt and walked over to her food bowl on the opposite side of the room to grab a small bite to eat. Thank the stars she'd never have to eat this flavorless stuff again. For now, Hana made due with what she had. She craned her neck, taking in a mouthful of kittypet food, crunching down on the hard pellets with effort. After swallowing a few bites she lifted her black front paw to tidy up her face and whiskers. With her stomach full and face clean, Hana took a step over to her water bowl to have a drink. The water tasted bitter and metallic on her tongue, barely quenching her thirst, but it would have to suffice. After her drink Hana stared down at her reflection in the water. This would be the last time

she'd see herself as a kittypet. Today, she would no longer be known as Hana, but as Swift. Once she'd step outside today, her life would change forever.

Swift walked over to the front door and yowled to get her Twoleg's attention. The towering creature approached her and did as she commanded, freeing her from the den without hesitation. Swift rubbed against her Twoleg one last time, looking back up at it with a light pang of sadness. She had been through so much with this Twoleg. Had it not been for them, she may have led an even more miserable life as a show cat. Swift was never cut out for that sort of thing. And perhaps she just wasn't cut out for kittypet life in general. She knew her Twoleg would miss her, and she had to admit she'd miss them too. But she knew the Twoleg would get another kitten soon to take her place. Hopefully that cat would take better care of them than she had. With the slightest hesitance, Swift tore herself away from the creature before heading outside and across the yard.

Today, Swift decided that she would walk right through the fence. She needed more time to herself before dealing with another cat coming up to talk to her. The last thing she wanted at the moment was a disturbance, and being on the fence was just begging to be noticed. She'd gather everyone up when she was ready to tell them the news.

Carefully, the small molly stuck one front leg through the gap in the fence, then the other, followed by her head. She was almost halfway through when something began tugging at her throat as she moved. Swift gagged, glancing back to see that her collar was caught on the fence post, a piece of the wood piercing through the fabric. With determination burning in her belly she continued to pull herself forward, trying to free her collar from the post's firm grip. She gasped desperately for air, retching as she tugged harder and harder. Exhaustion soon began to set in, causing Swift's head to throb from the lack of oxygen. Her limbs to felt numb. She stopped moving to catch her breath, dizziness blurring her vision. The she-cat growled in frustration, wiggling her nubby tail in annoyance. Pulling herself forward was only going to make her faint at best; at worst it would probably cause the death of her. *How am I going to survive in the wild if I can't even manage to escape from the yard on my own?* She brooded with a loud, annoyed huff.

There had to be a solution to her problem. There was no way that

sitting around and waiting for her Twoleg or another cat to come to her rescue could be her only way to freedom. After a moment of thought, Swift figured out a different approach she could try.
Slowly she stepped in reverse, bringing her paws into the yard. She pulled back on her haunches, hoping that would be able to pull the wood out of the fabric of her collar. To her imminent frustration, it was still caught. Swift grunted, pulling herself back harder to free herself with little success. Maybe the fence was trying to keep her here in her kittypet life, as if it knew she had decided to leave for good. But Swift wouldn't let it win. It was her destiny to be a clan cat, she had to fight this problem on her own no matter what. Swift unsheathed her claws, digging them into the dirt to give her a better firm-hold on the ground. She kept pulling back on her haunches. She dug and pushed at the ground, twisting and tugging her head against the collar as she moved. With effort and another hard tug, she felt her collar slip, sending her tumbling backwards into a flower patch. Immediately she stood up, shaking dust and flower petals off her patched pelt as she looked ahead at the fence. There, still stuck on the post was her collar. She had been freed! This truly must have been a sign that she was making the right choice, that she was worthy of escaping to join Shadowpaw and the rest of Grassclan in the wild.
Not wanting to risk getting caught again, Swift opted to hop up onto and over the fence this time. But not surprisingly, doing so brought unwanted attention.

"Hana!" Meeped a familiar, tiny voice from a neighboring yard. On top of the fence next door appeared the bluish-fawn she-cat, Flower. Swift looked up at her as she approached and laid down on the fence post, her front paws hanging off the edge.
"Where are you off to?" She asked, her amber eyes gleaming with curiosity. Swift glanced away from her, feeling uneasy all of a sudden. This kitten had been one of her closest friends in the whole neighborhood. They had been friends since the moment Swift was brought home for the first time. They always played and constantly got into mischief together. She would be crazy not to adore Flower so much.
Swift felt a lump form in her throat and regret churn in her stomach like a storm. This was going to be difficult to talk about, and it would be harder watching Flower get upset. But Swift wasn't

willing to change her mind, even if it meant breaking her best friend's heart.

"Back to the meadow," Swift admitted, her voice flat. She couldn't bring herself to meet the other molly's amber gaze.

"Oh how lovely. Well where's your collar? You can't go out without it, silly! It'll be hard to get back home if a housefolk catches you without it on," remarked Flower naively.

"Well-" before Swift had the chance to reply, the voices of two other cats could be heard approaching. The upcoming cats were none other than the neighbors, Gem and Max. The pair sounded as if they were bickering between themselves again, as usual. When they were close enough, the conversation stopped and the pair turned their attention to the mollykits.

"Hana! Where have you been? You disappeared yesterday and didn't come back!" Gem retorted to Swift with sternness. Gem was such a motherly cat, she worried so much about every cat and kit in the neighborhood. She was definitely going to have Flower beat when it came to handling Swift's decision. In fact, she'd probably take the news the hardest out of all their friends.

"I went out into the meadow yesterday, remember?"

"Oh yeah!" Max chimed in. "How was it?"
Swift smiled, excited to see her friends weren't freaking out about her outing just yet. Without hesitation she was ready to spill all the things she had experienced out in the meadow to the other kittypets.

"It was beautiful! The grass was so long, even though it's only Newleaf. I felt like I had walked right into one of my dreams. It was very relaxing," she gushed, pausing momentarily before continuing on about her adventure. "I also met some wildcats while I was out there. They were so tall, almost as tall as you are, Max. But scrawny, underfed. Like you had said. They kinda reminded me of rabbits. But I could tell they're far stronger and faster than any kittypet." The three cats looked at her with puzzled expressions when she used the word "kittypet".

"That's amazing!" Oliver squealed in astonishment as he bounded across his yard to join his sister on the fence; he had been outside long enough to catch the tail end of Swift's story.

"Did you get into a fight with any of them?" asked Max with interest. Swift nodded.

"I did get attacked. I still have a couple of scratches on my flank that sting a little. Honestly at first, I thought I was going to be crowfood. But I didn't back down or run away or anything. Luckily, I was only fighting the smallest of the cats I met."

"Wow, I knew they had to be tough. But then again, you're pretty tough yourself for taking one on," remarked Oliver.

"I could never imagine living a life like that. It's far too much work, and far too dangerous," Gem mewled crudely, grooming her chest fur which had become ruffled at the thought. "You're lucky they didn't kill you."

"Well, I can imagine living like that," confessed Swift. "In fact... I was offered the chance to go live in their clan, and I've made up my mind. I'm going to join them. The universe has given me strong signs that it's the right choice to make. I mean look, my collar even came off when I tried to get out of my yard."
The other kittypets stared at Swift, a mixture of shock, concern, and sadness written on all their faces.

"Does that really count as a sign though?" Oliver queried, twitching his whiskers doubtfully.

Swift gave a shrug, lowering her ears. "I mean, maybe? Would I have lost it if I hadn't been trying to go to the meadow?"

"You would have lost it squeezing yourself through that old fence regardless of where you were headed," Max remarked, grooming a paw. "That's just a coincidence."

"Well what about my dreams? Everything I heard, and smelled, and felt, and saw was real. I heard the voice of the clan leader in my dreams, before I had even met her. I *saw* her. I saw the clan!"

Embarrassment began to bubble in Swift's chest, heating her pelt uncomfortably. She felt as though the other cats thought she was crazy. But she wasn't. They hadn't experienced what she had. They couldn't possibly begin to understand.

"H-Hana...are you really serious?" Gem mewed quietly in disbelief, twitching her ears. Swift nodded, standing firm in her choice.

"I'm extremely serious. And my name isn't Hana anymore, It's Swift," she confirmed. Gem's eyes grew wide with shock, her ears lowering slightly.

"You can't go!" Flower wailed suddenly, leaping down from her perch to stand face to face with the Swift, her brother following her down. "I'll miss you! What if we never get to see you again?" Swift took a step back keeping a black paw raised up to her chest as if to defend herself. The guilt welling inside her was unbearable, but the urge to be in the meadow again far outweighed the feeling. Her blue eyes shined with sadness and slight pity for her friend as they stared at each other for a moment.

"I'll miss you too," Swift purred sadly, hesitating before stepping forward to lick the bridge of the other kitten's nose . "But I have to go. I'm not happy here anymore. I can't ignore my destiny, its as clear as day that this is the right decision."

"It won't be the same without you here Hana- I mean... Swift!" yowled Gem sadly, scrunching up her nose as she spoke the younger she-cat's new name. Swift nudged the curly eared she-cat gently with her muzzle.

"I'm sorry. But I have to go," she apologized. The quartet of sad cats approached their friend to rub up against her and groom her reassuringly.

"I guess there's no stopping you, Swift." Max sniffled, blinking back tears. "You've always been stubborn after making important decisions like this."

"But can't we at least spend a little more time together? Please?" Flower begged quietly, her amber eyes as wide as a full moon,

pleading. Swift took a moment to think about it, then nodded.

"I have until sundown. So I guess I can stay until then."

Swift found herself far busier than she had thought she'd be that day. Her friends insisted on taking her around the neighborhood to talk to their other friends and say her goodbyes to them all. Each cat gave her advice on how to survive out on in the wild, despite most of them having little to no experience out on their own. Perhaps some of them would wise up and join her some day in the clans.

Time seemed to pass by so quickly, and before Swift knew it, it was time for her to go. The sun hung low in the sky, streaking colors of orange and grey across the endless above. It was getting close to sunset. Swift said her final goodbye to her friends, meowing a promise to come back and visit them all one day once she was settled. With that done, she padded off towards the meadow. Before turning the corner off her block, she gave one final look back at the neighborhood she had grown up in before moving on, her kittypet life finally left behind her.

Chapter 4

[image]

The wind flowed through Swift's short patched fur as she ran full speed out of Twolegplace, far from her old home, and far from her kittypet life. Small tears pooled in the corners of her eyes but she managed to blink them away. Though her heart seemed to cry for her instead. She was going to miss her friends dearly. They had been so reluctant to let her leave. *This was definitely the right decision*, she reminded herself. Swift knew this was the right life for her, even if for a heartbeat it hurt to say goodbye. From now on she was a wildcat. She'd be a cat of myth just like the clan cats; a figure kittypet queens would warn their kittens about when they'd looked beyond the borders of their Twoleg dens. She was going to make something of herself. She was going to be a warrior.
Swift slowed to a complete halt as she came to the clearing from the day before. The same spot where she had met Shadowpaw. Swift secretly hoped the little black tom would be accompanying Tigerfang this evening when he came to fetch her. With time to kill, Swift padded to the clearing's center to wait. She sat down with her ears pricked, listening for any sounds that may alert her to the clan cat's arrival. She kept sniffing the air as well, trying to see if she could catch any catscent on the wind. She didn't want to be caught off guard like yesterday. In the area surrounding her, Swift could only catch the stale scent of the clan cats still lingering around. The young molly found herself feeling lonesome as the smell lingered in her scent glands; she yearned to see the Grassclan cats again. *It's very close to sundown, Tigerfang should arrive in a few heartbeats*.
Swift kneaded the soft sand beneath her paws impatiently, closing her eyes to enhance her senses. Nearby she could hear birdsong, the beautiful unscripted melody filled her ears and her heart with delight. She could get used to this. The twittering of birds in Newleaf meant more chicks would be hatched soon. More chicks meant more food to feed the clan. *This was a very good time of year to meet the clan cats*, she thought to herself with a smile. *Not only will I have better opportunities to learn to hunt, but I'll be able to prove myself by bringing the clan big juicy prey!*

Silence abruptly cut through the air, as if claws had come to rip the birdsong from Swift's ears. Swift blinked open her eyes, glancing around the clearing. *What happened, where did the birds go?* There must have been something nearby which had scared the birds into silence. Swift rose to her paws, parting her jaws to taste the air once more. There was an unmistakable scent of cat drifting in the breeze, and it was fresh, but she couldn't tell where it was coming from. In an instant, a flash of grey and white flew past Swift's field of vision. Swift whipped her head around to see a young cat fall down into a crouch in front of her. They turned tail to face her, raising their chin to appear taller, more confident. Swift's pelt bristled in alarm. Who was this cat? They looked to be around her height, with a much bulkier body. Their frame was draped with long grey and white tabby fur, which may have only brought on the illusion of their size. Soft meadow green eyes met with Swift's wide bright blues, emotion in them unreadable. Swift decided to give the air around them another sniff. The stranger carried a very similar scent to the Grassclan cats, one of morning dew, and freshly bloomed flowers. It brought Swift a bit of peace of mind, knowing this cat was probably part of the clan she would soon join. However, she couldn't help but feel prickly. Would this cat attack her like Shadowpaw had, unaware that Swift was actually her ally and not an enemy?

"Hi!" giggled the cat, grinning playfully. "I'm Frostpaw. Gee, you sure smell funny," she remarked, taking another step closer, sniffing at Swift curiously.

"Leave her alone, Frostpaw," meowed a familiar voice. Swift instantly relaxed at the sight of Shadowpaw and Tigerfang, her heart leaping for joy. The clan cats had finally come to take her home. She hadn't even stepped foot near the clan yet and she already felt so welcomed, even if a bit uneasy too.

"Hello Tigerfang, hi Shadowpaw," mewed Swift, the excitement in her voice unmistakable. The two familiar cats nodded acknowledgingly.

"I'm glad to see she actually showed up," meowed an unfamiliar cat loudly as he stepped out of the grass beside Tigerfang. This new tom was strange. His fur was like a lamb's, white and curly, his pelt

making him appear rather thin. His long narrow face was set with an eerie pair of pale blue eyes, only adding to his oddity. *Why did all these new cats have to accompany Tigerfang?* Swift wondered. Was the entourage really necessary? Perhaps she should see it more as a friendly welcoming party instead. After all, now was a time to be excited, not worried about who was here and why.

"Sheeptail!" mewed Frostpaw loudly and happily, running up to bump her head on the new cat's. Swift watched as Frostpaw pointed at her with her tail and moved her paws and whiskers in an unusual manner, earning a chuckle from the taller tom.

"I'd like to introduce you to our newest clanmate. Grassclan, this is Swift. Swift, this is Frostpaw and her mentor Sheeptail," meowed Tigerfang, presenting each cat with his tail.

Frostpaw made some gestures next to her mentor before speaking up. "I was just made an apprentice at sunhigh." She purred proudly, receiving a lick on the ear from Sheeptail.

"Why does Frostpaw keep moving around like that?" Swift whispered as she shuffled closer to Shadowpaw.

"Sheeptail can't hear very well so Frostpaw's communicating with him through our Silent Language. She's also interpreting what he doesn't understand," Shadowpaw explained. Swift let out a small "ooh" in response, pelt flushing warm with embarrassment. Now she felt bad thinking about how strange the tom was. Shadowpaw edged closer to her, giving her a small reassuring grin. Swift lifted her nubby tail and smiled back at him, trying to will away her feeling of guilt, replacing it with her excitement.

"If you kits are done standing around in the field, perhaps we should head back to camp now?" Sheeptail suggested. Frostpaw bounced on her paws, pressing her shoulder to her mentor's as he lead the group away without another word. Tigerfang flicked his ear, beckoning his own apprentice to come along.

"Try to keep up, kittypet." Shadowpaw purred playfully, flicking Swift's ear with the tip of his tail, just like he had done the evening before. Only now Swift was able to stick around him long enough to

bat at his ear with a playful paw in return. Shadowpaw chuckled, padding ahead to coax her to follow as the patrol now abandoned the clearing.

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The group sprinted together far across the meadow, farther than Swift had ever imagined she would go. She followed just behind the others to see where they would lead. In the fading light of the sun, she took in the scene around her. The grass was beginning to regain it's color. Flower buds popped up between the blades to one day decorate the land in endless color. Birds flew overhead, singing their happy little songs. Streaks of pink and orange painted clouds hung lazily in the sunset. Newleaf showed itself to be promising after all. *Just like Whitestar had said*.
The group traveled through the meadow over hills, rocks, and patches of sand. Swift found it a bit difficult to keep up with the others the further they ran. She wasn't used to moving so much, and her plump belly didn't help much either-it only served to slow her down. The longer she ran, the more her paws ached and legs grew tired. A voice in the back of her mind yowled at her to stop and rest. But Swift wouldn't let herself; she was determined to show the patrol that she could keep up just as well as any clan born cat could. She wanted to prove herself worthy of being a wildcat, defying her kittypet tendencies. After all, if she couldn't at least keep pace with her new clanmates, how would she ever turn out to make a good warrior?
Much to her relief, the group soon began to slow down. They came to a stop at the base of a large hill, one which was steeper than the ones they'd ran over before.

"We're almost at camp," Sheeptail turned his head to adress the patrol.

"Can you smell it yet?" Frostpaw excitedly asked Swift as they walked up the hill's slope.

Swift sniffed the air a moment before exclaiming in astonishment, "I smell cats, lots of them!"

"That's it." Shadowpaw purred, tilting his head.

"One day you will know every catscent by name. But for now, being able to smell them at all is a good start," mewed Tigerfang.
Swift remembered being able to catch whiff of something whenever another cat was nearby back at Twolegplace. But she hadn't ever thought about every cat having their unique scent-especially when living in a group. She knew it was going to be difficult for her to learn every one, on top of all the other things she'd have to learn about being a warrior, that is. But she would do it. *I'll do whatever it takes to truly be one of you.*
A cluster of bramble bushes greeted them as the patrol reached the hill's peak. A small hole gave way under the thorny branches, big enough for one cat to fit through. Sheeptail looked back at the other four cats before he slipped into the hole with ease, disappearing from sight. *This must be the entrance to camp!* One by one, the cats ducked into the hole, with Swift as the last one outside. She wanted to go into the bushes with the others but she couldn't help hesitating for a moment, suddenly doubting herself. Could she really do this? Could she really be in a clan? Was it really even possible that someone like her could be accepted by a bunch of warriors?

"What are you waiting for? C'mon! Everyone's dying to meet you!" meowed Frostpaw, who stuck her head out of the hole to look at the doubtful she-cat. Swift glanced around before reluctantly following the fluffy molly in. To her surprise they weren't just bushes at all. The hole in the brambles was actually a tunnel. The surprisingly roomy passage lead straight into a vast, grass covered clearing filled with rocks, bushes, and cats! Lots and lots of cats scurried around, all going about their day. Warriors could be seen laying around sharing gossip and prey. Elders lounged outside their den, soaking up the last bit of sunlight while grooming each other. Queens slipped under a bush where mewling kits cried out to be fed. Swift looked around in amazement. She had never seen anything like this before, even on the magic vision box back in her Twoleg's den.
It seemed as if the clan had never seen anything like her either. All eyes turned to look in Swift's direction almost the same instant she had walked into camp. They must have noticed her odd smell. Swift lowered her ears a little bit out of bashfulness, glancing at those who gawked at her. Blood roared in her ears as her heart began to

pound quickly in her chest. It was obvious that she nervous from all this unwanted attention. Her pelt burned from all the eyes upon her and she now averted her gaze, shuffling her paws.

Tigerfang rounded the nervous she-cat, resting his tail on her shoulders. "You shouldn't be afraid, Swift," he mewed into her ear reassuringly.

"I'm not," Swift insisted, gaining a look from the older tabby.

"You shouldn't lie either. I can smell your fear. They all can too." He flicked an ear at the crowd before giving his attention back to her. "If you show them cowardice, they will never accept you as one of us. You must prove yourself fearless, even in the presence of something that scares you."
Swift looked at Tigerfang for a moment, let out a small sigh, and turned her gaze to stare back ahead at the crowd. Her heartbeat slowed as she finally calmed down.

"Ok," she said steadily. "I won't be afraid."
Two cats were spotted in the center of camp, emerging from the crack in a boulder. Swift recognized the one to be Whitestar, flanked by a similarly sized fawn colored cat.

"Oh wow, she came," the cat remarked to Whitestar as they padded across the clearing. Swift contained a squeal of elation at the presence of the leader. She was so happy to see her again.

"As I knew she would." Whitestar nodded once in reply, stopping in front of Swift and Tigerfang with her companion. The siamese she-cat stared down at the white and black patched molly, a look of joy showing in her blue eyes. "Welcome to Grassclan young one," she purred, tilting her head back up to speak with her mate and Sheeptail. "What do you make of her?"

"Despite her plump stocky body weighing her down, she kept up well," Tigerfang reported.

"She also stood her ground against Frostpaw when she jumped out and surprised her," Sheeptail added in his booming voice as he came closer to speak.

"I like her," Frostpaw chimed, smiling widely. Sheeptail smacked her away playfully with a gentle paw. Whitestar looked at the two warriors for a moment, then back at her companion who gave her a small nod.

"Well then, I believe it's time we introduce her to the clan." Whitestar padded back over to the boulder, with the fawn colored she-cat in toe. The cat stayed seated at the boulder's base, while Whitestar leapt up onto the to it's peak.

"Let all cats old enough to run across the meadow, gather here beneath the Tall Stone for a clan meeting," she yowled, her voice echoing around camp. At her call, every cat in the camp turned to approach Tall Stone. The clan gathered together, looking up at their leader expectantly. Their eyes reflected in the last bits of sunlight in flecks of yellows and greens. Tigerfang moved, brushing his tail along Swift's flank.

"Follow me," he beckoned, walking forward. Swift followed, the two of them making their way through the crowd which parted for them as they passed. Tigerfang sat at the front next to his apprentice. Not knowing what to do, Swift stayed where she was until the fawn colored molly waved her plumed tail, motioning for Swift to come forward.

"Today is a great day for Grassclan. An outsider has graciously volunteered to join our ranks to help provide new blood and make Grassclan stronger. Tigerfang and Sheeptail have met this young cat, and have agreed with me that she will make a fine addition to our clan," Whitestar began, turning her blue gaze from the crowd, to Swift and called out, "From this day forward, until she has earned her warrior name, this apprentice shall be known as Swiftpaw. Chicorynose, you have proven to make a fine mentor in the past. I believe you will do an excellent job teaching Swiftpaw our way of life. Guide her paws on the path to become a great warrior, just as I have guided your paws on the path to becoming a great future leader."
The fawn colored she-cat, Chicorynose, walked up to Swiftpaw from the base of Tall Stone.

"We must touch noses, that is our custom," she mewed, her voice

soft. Swiftpaw nodded, leaning forward to touch her nose to her new mentor's. The clan suddenly broke out into a chant.

"Swiftpaw! Swiftpaw! Swiftpaw!" they cheered. Swiftpaw fluffed up her chest, her heart bursting with pride. There was no turning back now. She wanted to make everyone proud; Whitestar, Chicorynose, Tigerfang, Sheeptail, Shadowpaw, Frostpaw, and her kittypet friends all included. Swiftpaw silently vowed to train as hard as she could to become the greatest warrior she could be.

Chapter 5

[image]

The clan meeting was dismissed once Swiftpaw received her apprentice name. Cats of the clan padded past her, meowing their greetings and congratulating her on her acceptance into the clan. In such a short time she already felt so at home here. Frostpaw soon bounded up to Swiftpaw through the dissipating crowd bouncing excitedly, her fluffy long fur flowing as she did.

"Wow Swiftpaw, you got the deputy as your mentor, you're soo lucky!" she beamed. "Chicorynose is so nice, you're gonna learn a lot from her."

"I hope so," mewed Swiftpaw, pushing at a pebble by her paw bashfully. What was a deputy anyways? It must be an important rank if Frostpaw was making such a big deal over it. Swiftpaw didn't really think much of it, it's not like she was receiving special treatment because she was born an outsider. Unless it was rare for a deputy to take on an apprentice. She made a mental note to ask someone about that later.

"I can help!" Frostpaw trilled, interrupting the other molly's thoughts. "I'm sure we'll both be taken on a tour of the territory soon, but I want to be the one to show you the camp!" The long hair silver and white tabby offered, still bouncing on her paws giddily.

"I'll come with," caterwauled Shadowpaw as he walked over to join the two mollies. Swiftpaw dipped her head to her friend only to be nudged playfully on her own shoulder by the black tom. Frostpaw bounded to the other side of camp, beckoning the other two apprentices to follow. Their first stop was a large beautiful honeysuckle bush. The leaves were a deep rich green, small buds dotted all around the foliage ready to burst. Their fragrance was unmistakable even when the blossoms weren't yet in bloom.

"This is the nursery!" Frostpaw began. "It's where the clan's young are raised by the queens." Swiftpaw crouched down to peer inside

the mouth of the den. Underneath the bush was a large dugout, the floor lined with wool. Within that dugout was the nursery, and in it were two mollies laying down and chatting from their nests. One queen was a sleek silver tabby, and the other was a light brown tabby. The brown tabby was a bit chubbier, but anyone with eyes could guess why with those four little bundles of fur curled up against her belly. The silver molly noticed the apprentices's presence at the nursery entrance and crawled out of the den to greet them.

"Mama," chirped Frostpaw, bumping her head gently against the older she-cat's affectionately. The silver tabby purred loudly, licking the fluffy apprentice's head and cheeks, rubbing her thin, streamline face against the younger cat's more broad one.

"Swiftpaw, this is one of my moms. Her name is Jaybird." Frostpaw giggled as Jaybird helped straighten out her whiskers with her soft grey nose.

"Nice to meet you," Swiftpaw dipped her head respectfully to the queen. Jaybird turned her attention to the new apprentice, eyeing her with interest. Her tail-tip swayed gently by her side and a smile spread across her face.

"And you as well," she replied in her soft delicate voice before slipping back into the nursery. Frostpaw motioned for the others to follow her over to the next part of camp. The next den the apprentices came up to was a dusty old boulder with a large crack in its side. Looking inside would reveal a surprisingly roomy living space with nests of bracken and wool littered all over the stone floor in neat little piles.

"This is where the warriors sleep," announced Shadowpaw with excitement in his tone. "This is where we'll be staying after we're given our warrior names. But for now we're forbidden to enter inside unless there's an emergency."

Swiftpaw wondered what it would be like to be a warrior. Perhaps it would be challenging, after all warriors had to fight to protect everything they held dear which included prey, territory, and the clan as a whole. She supposed this was a thought every apprentice

had but she wasn't certain of it. Whatever it would be like, she knew the rewards of becoming a warrior would be great. The clan born apprentices beckoned the young molly onward with eagerness, taking her to the den on the other side of the nursery. The den was woven out of a couple of gorse bushes, bracken nests lovingly placed in it's center. Outside laid a couple of large, battle scarred cats grooming one another. They had varying degrees of grey dappling their pelts depending on the cat, and though they were large and clearly well passed fully grown it was obvious by their frail structures that they were well into their golden moons.

"This is the elders den," meowed Frostpaw.

"Let me guess, it's where the old cats live?" retorted Swiftpaw humorously.

"Hey, who are you calling old?" rasped one of the elders. The elder who had spoken was a white tom with a terrible scar that went diagonally across his face from a torn ear all the way down to the under bite of his lower left jaw. Swifpaw flinched and lowered her ears, finding him hard to look at. What could have caused such a terribly ugly injury?

"Don't be afraid of ol' Tornface here, Swifpaw," cooed another elder warmly. This elder was an old dark ginger molly with orange eyes. Her pelt was dull with age but her eyes still shined with liveliness. "He's still bitter about having to retire."

"I was a fantastic warrior! I could have served many more moons if Whitestar hadn't-"

"Allowed you the choice of retiring to relax for the rest of your days because you were so tired?" The molly interrupted with snark in her tone. Tornface growled, lashing his tail in annoyance. "Please don't mind him. He's a great cat when he warms up to you, I swear."

Swiftpaw nodded in understanding, unoffended by the elder tom's bitter attitude.

"Care to share a rabbit with us, young ones?" chimed another elder, another dark ginger molly with sparkling yellow-green eyes.

"Have you ever tried rabbit, Swiftpaw?" asked the first molly.

"Of course she hasn't, Poppycloud. She was a kittypet. It's easy to tell from the twoleg stench clinging so heavily to her pelt. An untrained kittypet could never have tasted a rabbit, yet alone catch one on their own to try it," retorted the second elder molly to the first. Poppycloud nodded in understanding, while another of the elders let out a soft grunt in agreement.

"Actually I've never really eaten anything but kittypet and twoleg food," Swiftpaw admitted. The third elder, a dark brown tom with a grey muzzle and green eyes, let out a gasp. The last of the elders sat up from his spot, his dull black pelt shimmering slightly in the last of the day's sunlight. Both elder tom seemed as if they were in disbelief over the young she-cat's words.

"Then you have to try some!" insisted the second molly.

"Of course she should, Meadowcall. If she's going to be a part of Grassclan, she has to learn to love rabbit," Poppycloud nodded once firmly, pushing a plump rabbit she has sitting beside her towards the white and black patched molly. "Go ahead, have some," she insisted.

Swiftpaw bent down to sniff at the rabbit. It was a scent she had never smelled before, but the aroma made her mouth water. She hesitated for another moment before taking the very first bite with caution. She chewed slowly to catch the flavor on her tongue to make a proper judgement on its taste. Swiftpaw's eyes grew wide. This was more amazing than anything she had ever eaten before. The rabbit's meaty flavor danced on her tongue, bringing the she-cat energy and a more ravenous appetite. Without further hesitation she dug into the rabbit's soft flesh and began to gorge herself. She hasn't realized how famished she was after all she had done so far that day.

"So how is it?" Shadowpaw asked with interest.

"This is the best food I've ever had!" Swiftpaw exclaimed, rabbit blood staining the white fur around her mouth. The elder she-cats twitched their whiskers in amusement.

"Well scoot over, save some for the rest of us," purred Frostpaw, sitting next to her. The three apprentices sat in front of the plump rabbit, eating their fill until it was nothing but fur and bones. The elders purred, satisfied to see the young cats have a good meal.

The apprentices said a brief farewell to the elder cats, continuing on with their tour. The clan born cats led Swiftpaw to the other side of camp past the Tall Stone to a small tree covered in ivy. Looking past the ivy veil revealed a large den inside the tree trunk. A harsh smell of herbs was emanating from the entrance which became stronger when one ducked their head inside. Shadowpaw poked his head into the den, popping out a moment later with three cats following him.

"This is the medicine cats' den," he stated, "It's where the sick and injured come to be treated. It's also where our medicine cats live." He motioned to the three cats sitting in front of them with his head.

"Swiftpaw I'd like to introduce you Snowfrost, our senior medicine cat," Frostpaw began, looking at a pretty white and silver lynx point molly with a plumed silver striped tail and blue eyes. "Goldensong, our main medicine cat," she continued, tilting her head towards a lanky pale ginger and white molly with green eyes. "And her apprentice, my sister, Mistypaw," she concluded, rubbing her fluffy cheek against her sister. Mistypaw had glossy, long, pale silver fur and pretty green eyes. Swiftpaw couldn't help but take notice of the molly's beauty.

"Welcome to Grassclan, Swiftpaw," meowed Goldensong sweetly. "We're happy to have you here. Aren't we girls?"

Mistypaw nodded slightly in agreement, acting a little shy. Snowfrost on the other hand just looked at Swiftpaw with her tail tip twitching, her icy gaze unreadable but it managed to send chills down the young molly's spine. Swifpaw glanced away feeling uneasy.

"Allow me the honor of showing Swiftpaw the last of the camp," Mistypaw offered quietly, rising to her paws. Frostpaw nodded eagerly, standing by her side. Mistypaw led them over to the Tall Stone, to a side of it they hadn't seen before.

"You already know the Tall Stone. But did you know back here is where Whitestar sleeps?" Mistypaw remarked, motioning to a large crack in the boulder with a paw. Swiftpaw looked at it curiously but didn't dare to approach in fear that peering inside might get her in trouble. Mistypaw let out a call to the others to follow her about two bear lengths away.

"This is the den you'll be sleeping in, the apprentice den. We have some extra wool in the medicine den you can use to make your nest with," Mistypaw mewed. The den was inside a pile of large rocks, it looked hard to squeeze in for anyone who wasn't as lanky as the Grassclan cats. Swiftpaw wondered how Frostpaw manages to get inside. Maybe she was a lot scrawnier than her long coat led on.

"Wanna have a look inside?" asked Shadowpaw. Swiftpaw nodded, and the little black apprentice led the way in. To her surprise, she was able to easily squeeze through the entrance, even while being a little more plump than the other cat. As expected there were several nests littering the floor. Some closer together than others.

"How many apprentices are there?" Asked Swiftpaw with curiosity.

"Well let's see. There's quite a few of us. You, me, Frostpaw, Mistypaw, her brother Rabbitpaw, Quailpaw, and Heatherpaw. Those three are probably out with their mentors still, I'm sure you'll meet them soon," replied Shadowpaw, leading her back out to meet with the fluffy apprentices who waited for them outside. The sisters urged for the other two to follow them back towards the Tall Stone, stopping about a fox length away.

"This is where we put the fresh kill," Mistypaw said, gesturing with her paw at a pile of prey. "And over in that direction is the dirtplace." She concluded tilting her head in the direction of a small hole in the bramble bushes on the opposite side of camp.

"And that's it. That's all of Grassclan camp," announced Shadowpaw. "So what do you think?"

Swiftpaw's eyes shined with joy as she began to bounce around a bit. "It's fantastic!" She exclaimed. "More amazing than I imagined. I know I'm going to like it here."

"Glad to hear it," Shadowpaw replied with a purr. By now the sun had completely set and cats began to come back into camp. A trio of apprentices approached the other four who sat by the fresh-kill pile, placing down prey they had been carrying.

"Who's this?" asked a fluffy white and silver lynx point tom in a stern tone, his fur bristling threateningly.

"She's Swiftpaw, a new apprentice Whitestar let into the clan!" Frostpaw announced. "Swiftpaw, this is my brother, Rabbitpaw. And those two are Quailpaw and Heatherpaw, the other apprentices."

"It's great to meet you." Swiftpaw smiled politely. Rabbitpaw glared at her, giving her a sniff.

"She smells really odd. Was she a rouge?"

"No, she was a kittypet actually," replied Frostpaw.

"Ew, why would we need a kittypet in the clan? We already have enough apprentices," snarled Rabbitpaw. He placed a paw over his nose in disgust, swaying his fluffy silver tabby tail violently enough to kick up a small dust cloud against the floor. *Do I really smell?* Swiftpaw wondered, feeling self conscious.

"Because she's super important, you mouse-brain," Mistypaw snapped with unusual attitude. All of the apprentices looked at her strangely, waiting for her to elaborate. However Mistypaw decided that she had said enough already and opted to remain quiet despite the curious eyes of the others burning a hole in her pelt.

"Plus it's pretty pointless to make that old 'oh kittypets can't be warriors' argument when there's a whole clan out there that's mostly made of kittypets. Not to mention the warrior code says any cat can join a clan so long as they respect our ways. Don't be so ignorant, Rabbitpaw," interjected Shadowpaw, lashing his tail. Swiftpaw smiled, flattered that Mistypaw and Shadowpaw were standing up for her.
"Just because you're a new apprentice and don't know much about the Code yet doesn't excuse you for being a jerk."

Rabbitpaw stared at Shadowpaw for a moment before looking away in embarrassment. He muttered a quiet, bitter apology before grabbing a mouse off the fresh-kill pile and walking off to eat by himself by the apprentice den.

"Don't mind him. He's probably just got a bee up his nose or something," sneered Frostpaw. "Anyways, let's get you some wool. I'm sure you're ready to get some rest."

"I could show her where it is," Mistypaw offered. Swiftpaw beamed, nodding. She followed the pretty she-cat back to the medicine den to grab a ball of wool to sleep on before heading over to the apprentice den. The two she-cats slipped inside; Mistypaw helped Swiftpaw set up her nest, then mewed a quiet good night before padding out of the den and back to her own. One by one the other apprentices soon came piling in, muttering their goodnigts before curling up and falling asleep. Swiftpaw let out a small yawn as she curled up in her own nest making herself comfortable. The wool was just as soft as her kittypet nest but smelled strongly of Grassclan and sheep. It was a strange yet comforting smell, and soon it helped lull her to sleep.

Chapter 6

[image]

Morning arrived swiftly, bringing the bright sun along with it. Newleaf's intense golden rays shined through the minuscule cracks in the den's walls right into Swiftpaw's eyes. The white and black patched molly groaned, trying to cover her face with her paws in an attempt to block out the light. It was at times like this she wished she had been born with a regular tail rather than the black stump which was perched on her rear. Swiftpaw let out a harsh huff, squeezing her eyes shut tightly, not ready to greet the world yet. Try as she may to drift back to sleep, it seemed like the world wasn't having any of that. She felt something prod her side, followed by a soft mew.

"Swiftpaw, wake up. It's time to start your first full day as an apprentice. I'm taking you on dawn patrol with me," cooed the soft familiar voice of Chicorynose. Swiftpaw's eyes fluttered open slowly; she lifted her head to look up at the fawn colored molly with eyes half lidded, her blue gaze greeted by the deputy's green. She nodded slightly as she registered what Chicorynose had said and rose to her paws, digging her claws into the dirt to pull back into a full body stretch. Drowsy, she left her warm nest behind to follow her mentor out of the den into the fresh morning air. A bright blinding light washed over her, warming the young she-cat's pelt. It took a moment and some blinking before her eyes adjusted to the new light of day flooding the camp and her senses. When she was able to properly focus her gaze she was surprised to see Shadowpaw and Tigerfang standing with Chicorynose, wide awake and full of energy. Embarrassed by her state, Swiftpaw quickly whipped around to groom herself, ridding herself of her nest head. She noticed clumps of wool still clinging to her fur and was grateful she took the time to clean herself up before they left. After a quick wash, the white and black patched she-cat sat up straight, meowing a soft "good morning" to her peers. Satisfied that everyone was ready, Chicorynose twitched her tail prompting the three other cats to follow her to the camp's edge and through the bramble tunnel.

Swiftpaw brought up the rear of the patrol as they walked out of the camp and into the welcoming meadow they called home. Shadowpaw purposely fell behind to walk beside her. The sight of the grass waving in the breeze and the sun beating down on the soft green blades never ceased to take the young molly's breath away. Though today it seemed as if more clouds were gathering than the day before, the sun managed to resist being overtaken by the fluffy shapes.

"So what are we doing?" Swiftpaw asked Shadowpaw, her voice cracking a bit from fatigue. Her blue eyes showed how tired she was but curiosity for the day's activity still managed to twinkle through.

"We're patrolling. Clan cats do this a few times a day to check and mark our borders. All cats in the clans do it eventually," Shadowpaw responded, keeping his gaze on the path ahead.

"Why do we have to do that?"

"To make sure everything is safe. We don't want cats from outside the clan trespassing on our territory or any danger making it's way to our camp. Checking and marking boundaries helps assure this won't happen. And if it does, we're here to get rid of the threat."
Swiftpaw took a moment to think. It was certainly a good idea to keep checking on things, but it seemed silly to stay separate from the other clan cats. But Swiftpaw assured herself that there must be a reason the clans had not united together.
The group continued to walk across the open meadow, the wind blowing against their pelts. Swiftpaw felt the fur along her spine begin to rise as they drew closer to the area where she had first met Shadowpaw and his mentor, and Twolegplace. *Are they taking me back?*

"Don't fret, Swiftpaw. We'll be heading far past your old home today," assured Chicorynose as if she knew what her apprentice was thinking. *She must have caught my fearscent*, Swiftpaw thought with shame. Shadowpaw brushed his tail against her shoulders reassuringly for a moment and the young molly felt herself relax at his touch. She glanced over at him receiving a smile from the black tom in return.

It seemed like forever before they had finally come to a stop. The sound of rushing water filled Swiftpaw's ears and the scent of a riverbank clogged her nose. The grass cleared the farther up they walked until it cleared away completely, revealing the edge of a river. The three clanborn cats bent down to lap at the water and Swiftpaw decided to do the same. The fresh, cool liquid tasted wonderful, much better than the water she used to have to drink in her Twoleg's den. When her thirst was quenched, Swiftpaw lifted her head to peer around the area. The river seemed to stretch onward in either direction forever, but looking forward the other shore was not that far off. Swiftpaw couldn't help but wonder what was on the other side. Before there was time to ask questions, they were off again, taking another moment to pause in front of a Twoleg bridge. Swiftpaw was skeptical at first, but followed the others on the patrol over to the other side. Safely across, they followed the current down towards the east. The cats began to slow down as they headed towards a wooded area. Oak trees towered above them, their branches and buds blocked the warm sunlight that Swiftpaw was so fond of, only leaving small rays to sneak their way to the ground and onto their pelts. Suddenly the clan cats froze, but Swiftpaw hasn't realized. She continued to pad forward, only being snapped out of her thoughts when Chicorynose grabbed her by the scruff.

"Stop," she commanded as she let her go. "Don't pass the scent markers. We've reached the edge of our territory."
Scent markers? Swiftpaw sniffed the air, catching Grassclan's scent on the bark of the trees mingling with an unfamiliar catscent lingering on the other side of the trunks. Embarrassed that she hadn't caught the new smell Swiftpaw backed up a bit to stand beside her mentor a tail length away from the border.

"This is the Treeclan border," Tigerfang informed the apprentices, walking over to a tree to leave his mark.

"Make sure to memorize the scent. Near Treeclan, always turn your nose to the sky. Their warriors tend to linger in the trees," Chicorynose added. Just as the words escpaed her, a patrol jumped down from above and landed onto the ground across from them. Swiftpaw shrieked in surprise, jumping back. Her fur stood on end

as she stared at the four unfamiliar cats in front of her. They were even bigger than the Grassclan cats, and that made her feel uneasy. Taking a good look at them, Swiftpaw noticed just how powerful their limbs seemed. They were muscular, with broader faces than the one she had quickly gotten used to in her clan.

"Greetings Chicorynose, Tigerfang," meowed a white and black patched she-cat. She was young, her face broad and round, with green eyes bright with youth.

"Showing your apprentices the border too, eh?" Chimed a second molly. Swiftpaw couldn't tell if the sunlight was dappling her fur or if she had ginger patches decorating her black tabby coat. Chicorynose nodded.

"This is Shadowpaw, and our newest clanmember Swiftpaw." She gestured at each apprentice respectively. " 'Paws, this is Pepperpatch and Shadeleaf of Treeclan."

"A pleasure to meet you both. This is my apprentice, Smokepaw," meowed the tortoiseshell she-cat named Shadeleaf. The tom she was referring to was younger. He was almost her height already, and his fur was long, colored dark smokey grey like a storm cloud. The fur around his neck was extra fluffy, just a few shades lighter than the rest of him as well as a dot above each eye and his toes.

"And this is Magpiepaw," purred Pepperpatch. The molly she was gesturing to had white and black patched pelt like her mentor's. Though her tail was completely black and her fur was longer than the older she-cat's. In fact her fur was long and flowing just like the young tom's. The two young cats shared the same colored eyes, soft green like the grass of the meadow. Swiftpaw couldn't help but think of Frostpaw and Mistypaw when she stared into them.

"Nice to meet you!" Smokepaw beamed, his chest fur fluffing up with excitement. Magpiepaw nudged his shoulder playfully while Shadeleaf purred, giving the tom a quick lick on the ear.

"It's always a pleasure to meet a few fine, future warriors. However, we must be heading off now," Tigerfang informed them, the Treeclan cats nodding along in agreement. With that, the two

patrols parted ways, heading off in opposite directions.

"Are we going to see the rest of the borders?" Shadowpaw asked curiously. The tabby tom Tigerfang shook his head.

"We will be staying in the Forest Patch for a while," he responded. "Today, we hunt." Swiftpaw's heart skipped. She was going to hunt for the clan for the very first time. *How exciting, I can't wait!* The patrol walked a few bear lengths from the border before taking a seat in a small patch of sunlight.

"You two will be practicing partners today. You will learn to practice crouching and hunt as a team," Chicorynose mewed at them before dropping into a crouch. A bear length away, Tigerfang set down a giant oak leaf before padding over to Chicorynose's side, keeping a foxlength in distance between them. The apprentices watched the warriors from the sidelines as they began their demonstration.

"The proper way to hunt rabbits and hares is by ambush," Chicorynose meowed, slowly creeping forward, haunches up and paws barely touching the ground.

"Always stay downwind so you aren't scented. You must move lightly but quickly so the prey can't hear you coming. Rabbits and hares are tricky to catch, they'll hear you long before they can smell or see you." Tigerfang dropped into a crouch of his own, following the deputy's pawsteps. "Get as close to the prey as you can, then come at it from both sides," he meowed just as the two older cats leapt forward, attacking the leaf that lay in front of them from either side.

"To be a proper member of Grassclan, you must learn to work well with a partner." Chicorynose sat up to motion for the two apprentices to give the technique a try for themselves. The young pair moved a bearlength away from the leaf and began to work. Shadowpaw was the first to drop into a crouch, stalking forward just as his mentor and deputy had. Swiftpaw soon followed, glancing over every couple of heartbeats to keep up with the black apprentice. Eventually it was time to launch an attack, Shadowpaw lunged from the right while Swiftpaw took the left. Shadowpaw

managed to snag the leaf right before Swiftpaw had landed, slamming her head into the tom's as she came down from her leap. The two yowled as their heads butted against each other and Chicorynose laughed.

"You did good for your first time, Swiftpaw. Though you put too much weight on your paws while you stalk, it causes drag. You also hesitated for a moment too long. A second earlier and you may have been able to avoid hitting your head against the more experienced Shadowpaw's," she purred, walking over to give her apprentice a few reassuring licks between the ears. Swiftpaw rubbed her white front paw against her head, an eye closed from the mild pain.
"However you have one advantage that Shadowpaw does not. You don't have much of a tail to drag across the ground. Shadowpaw, however, does. Shadowpaw, you still need to work on lifting your tail above the ground so it isn't dragging in the leaf litter and creating noise." Shadowpaw nodded his head slightly in understanding.
"Now let's try that again."

Chicorynose had Swiftpaw and Shadowpaw practice their rabbit stalking a bit longer before moving on to other hunting techniques. Swiftpaw found her head reeling from all the new information she was taking in. She never knew just how many different crouches there were for prey. When the mentors were satisfied that their apprentices had applied themselves enough, they sent the young pair off on their own to put their new knowledge to work. Shadowpaw and Swiftpaw carefully stalked through the foliage, sniffing around for any scent of prey. It was a while before either of them found anything.

"Rabbit!" Shadowpaw gasped, grinning as he spotted the brown fuzzy creature nibbling on some clovers a foxlength away downwind. The pair exchanged glances before dropping to a crouch, splitting up to take on the rabbit from either side. Quietly, Swiftpaw crept forward, keeping an eye on her partner. A black-and-white warbler landed a tail length in front of Swiftpaw's path, hopping around on the litter of fallen blossoms pecking at the seeds, unaware how close it was to danger. An opportunity like this was

too good to pass up. She gave Shadowpaw an apologetic glance before changing her crouch. Slowly Swiftpaw snuck up closer and closer to her prey. Just as she was about to pounce, Shadowpaw jumped out to snatch the rabbit, sending him along with his target running. In the commotion the warbler was startled and began to take flight, but before it could fly off Swiftpaw jumped out of her hiding place and into the air. With her powerful legs she was able to leap at an amazing height. With limbs outstretched and claws extended she was able to snatch the little bird out of the air, bringing it back down to the ground where she pinned it and delivered the killing bite to the back of its neck. Triumphant, Swiftpaw picked up her catch in her jaws, pride swelling inside her. Shadowpaw soon returned to see her holding the feathery prey.

"Great catch! But we were supposed to be hunting that rabbit together," he mewed. Swiftpaw dropped the warbler at her paws.

"Well this was easier. Prey is prey isn't it? So long as it's on our territory. Don't get your whiskers in a twist." Swiftpaw rolled her eyes, licking her lips.

"The point of the exercise was the practice hunting difficult prey with a partner," meowed Chicorynose, coming out from her hiding spot. Her and Tigerfang had been hiding to assess the apprentices without distracting them. "However it seems Starclan wanted that rabbit to live for another day. I should say, I'm really impressed with that catch. Have you caught birds before?"

Swiftpaw smiled, her nubby tail standing erect. "My twoleg used to swing this ball of feathers on a vine around, I'd practice hunting with it." The clanborn cats looked at the patched molly as if she had three heads. Swiftpaw knew that her kittypet antics would seem a bit strange to them, but she couldn't help talking about her past. She wasn't ashamed of it, and it seemed that some of the things she'd do in captivity helped her out in the wild. Chicorynose ordered Swiftpaw to bury her warbler and try hunting with Shadowpaw again before she disappeared back into the undergrowth. A bit more focused, the apprentices pressed on. It wasn't long before they picked up the scent of another rabbit. Shadowpaw gave Swifpaw a serious glare as if to warn her not to goof off again before he slipped away into the foliage close to the

rabbit. Swiftpaw took on a crouch and crept towards it from the opposite side, keeping her eyes on the prey only taking a heartbeat every now and then to glance at Shadowpaw. When they were close enough, the young tom waved his tail to signal an attack. Together the apprentices jumped out of the bushes and landed on the rabbit. The fluffy creature struggled in the cats' grip, flailing its long back legs and dug at the ground with its paws in an attempt to slip free. Swifpaw put her weight into holding it down, digging her claws into its hide. Meanwhile Shadowpaw bent down to nip at the back of its neck, severing the rabbit's spine and killing it. Swiftpaw purred loudly.

"We did it!" She beamed. Shadowpaw chuckled. Together, they proudly buried their prey before going on the hunt again.

Chapter 7

[image]

It was sunhigh by the time the apprentices were finished hunting. After a rocky start, the pair managed to get into a groove. By the end of their time in the Forest Patch they caught one warbler, a rabbit, and a mouse each. Chicorynose praised their skills and ordered them to dig up their prey. Together, Swiftpaw and Shadowpaw carried their kill while their mentors led the way home with prey of their own. When they returned back to camp, the patrol placed their prey on the fresh-kill pile.

"Well done, 'Paws," Chicorynose praised. "Deliver that rabbit you caught to the queens. You can bring some prey to the medicine cats if you want. After you're done, go ahead and have a bite to eat yourselves." she touched each of them on the shoulder with her tail tip then dragged the hare she had caught over to the elders den. Shadowpaw dipped his head and picked up the rabbit, dragging it to the nursery, leaving his nubby tailed companion alone in the middle of camp. Thrilled to be left on her own for the first time, Swiftpaw bounced on her paws. She carefully picked up the warbler she had caught and walked over to the medicine den. Cautiously she poked her head inside, pushing past the ivy tendrils that curtained over the the den's mouth to see Mistypaw alone, sitting by the den's back wall. It looked as if she was organizing some herbs. Swiftpaw invited herself in, placing the warbler down at her paws. The strong scent of the herbs made back reel back for a moment, her lips curling in distaste. It took a heartbeat for her senses to adjust enough for her to speak.

"Mistypaw?" She mewed softly, not wanting to startle the other she-cat. Mistypaw perked her ears and turned around, letting out a small "hm?" as she noticed her guest. Her face lit up as she saw the white and black patched molly standing nearby.

"Oh, hello!" she chirped, tilting her head. "Is something wrong? Are you hurt?" worry laced her voice as she took a step forward, sniffing

in the other molly's direction.

Swiftpaw shook her head. "No, I'm fine. I just wanted to bring you something to eat. I thought you might be hungry." She pushed the warbler with her paw to present it. Mistypaw purred, rolling up the bundle of herbs she had been putting together before approaching the other molly. She looked down at the bird in front of her, moving it a bit with her paw as if she were examining it.

"Did you catch this?" she asked turning her gaze onto her visitor. Swiftpaw nodded, smiling proudly. "That's amazing! Cats here don't usually catch birds, even though they're pretty tasty. This is a rare treat, thank you!" Mistypaw smiled sweetly and Swiftpaw shuffled her paws bashfully, her own smile never wavering.
"Would you like to share it with me? I can finish my work later. We could lay outside the den and share tongues while we eat."

Swiftpaw's gaze met the fluffy silver she-cat's. *Share tongues*? she echoed in her head. She twitched an ear, dismissing the thought for now. "I would love to."
Mistypaw trilled giddily, bending down to pick up the black and white bird. The peppy she-cats padded through the ivy veil of the medicine den and over to a patch of sunlight a couple fox lengths away. They settled down, tearing open the warbler to share. Swiftpaw dug into their meal while Mistypaw plucked a couple of feathers from the dead bird. She expertly placed them on Swiftpaw's head with a soft giggle. She stared, admiring her work.
"What pretty plumage you have. They should call you Swiftbird!"

Swiftpaw blinked, turning her eyes upward in an effort to see the feathers. Mistypaw's giggles quickly turned into a *mrrow* of laughter muffled by her paws over her mouth. Swiftpaw shook her head, sending the feathers gently parachuting to the ground. A tiny feather landed on the white and black patched she-cat's muzzle causing her nose to wrinkle up. She let out a tiny sneeze, sending the little feather on journey to the ground to join the others. Mistypaw leaned over to groom the top of her companion's ear, which startled Swiftpaw. She pulled her head back to look at Mistypaw, flustered.

"What?" She asked. "We're sharing tongues."

So sharing tongues is grooming and talking? Why didn't she just say that? Swiftpaw thought "S..sorry," she mumbled, leaning back towards the other molly. Her pelt burned hot with embarrassment, which she tried her best to hide. Mistypaw purred softly and continued to groom her. If she had noticed Swiftpaw's bashfulness she didn't show it.

"So what did you think sharing tongues was?" The sliver she-cat asked as if she had read Swiftpaw's mind. Were medicine cats able to do that?

"I guess I thought it was just hanging out and talking." She murmured with a shrug. "I still don't know much about clan life yet, it's only my first day."
Mistypaw touched her nose to the side of Swiftpaw's ear supportively.

"You'll get the hang of things soon." The black and white patched molly smiled, tearing off another piece of warbler. The two young mollies sat and talked for a while longer after they had finished their meal, making jokes and telling tales about their kithood antics. Chicorynose approached them from the leader's den, where she had gone while the two apprentices were eating. She peered down at the two she-cats, curling up her tail in delight.

"Whitestar wants you to stay in camp the rest of today to learn some things from your new clanmates. Why don't you go visit the elders?" she suggested to Swiftpaw. "They're the history keepers of the clan after all, you could learn a lot from them. And while you're at it, check their pelts for ticks."
Checking the elders for ticks didn't sound like much of an enjoyable activity, but if it was a small price to pay to be better accepted in the clan, Swiftpaw was willing to do it. Mistypaw stood up and headed into her den without a word, leaving the other apprentice to wonder why. She turned her head, looking at the mouth of the den. A few heartbeats later, Mistypaw returned with a piece of moss soaked in a foul smelling substance. Swiftpaw's nose wrinkled in disgust, driving her to jump to her paws.

"You'll need this for the ticks," Mistypaw told her, placing the moss wad down. "After you're done you'll need to wash your paws. But

don't get any in your mouth, or you'll be met with a nasty surprise." As the silver she-cat passed on the moss, a familiar cat approached her from the far side of camp. It was Snowfrost, who had returned with a huge bundle of fresh herbs in her jaws. Her fur seemed a bit ruffled, her face written with sternness. She looked as if she had something to say, but refused to put down her supply. The lynx point molly twitched her whiskers, flicked her ears twice, and waved her tail while looking at Mistypaw. Mistypaw's ears lowered slightly.

"I wasn't goofing off, Snowfrost, I swear. I was just eating with Swiftpaw," she mewed in reply, sounding a little guilty. She shot Swiftpaw a glance before turning her eyes back towards the older medicine cat. Again, Snowfrost moved her whiskers, tail, and ears in a strange manner, throwing a couple of paw movements into the mix. At one point she pointed at the herbs she was holding, which made Mistypaw nod. She muttered another soft apology to the older she-cat before turning to Swiftpaw.

"Let me know if you have any trouble with that mouse bile. I'll see you later." And with that, she disappeared into the medicine den again with Snowfrost hesitating just outside. She briefly shot a cold glare at Swiftpaw before following Mistypaw inside with one final lash of her tail. A shiver ran down Swiftpaw's spine and a sensation of something being wrong overcame her for a heartbeat. She shook out her pelt and picked up the bile soaked moss, dismissing the feeling in favor of visiting the elders. She dipped her head to Chicorynose and went on her way. Swiftpaw excused herself as she entered the elders den, in case any cat was busy with something else when she arrived. The eyes of those that were awake turned onto her. Meadowcall and Poppycloud smiled gently at her while another two of the elders gave her a cold stare. Tornface let out a snort, resting his head back into his nest where it was settled before Swiftpaw arrived.

"Ah, Swiftpaw. To what do we owe this visit?" Asked Meadowcall with interest, sitting up from her nest.

"I'm here to help you with ticks?" Swiftpaw replied, her words sounding more like a question than a proclamation. In all honesty, she wasn't exactly sure how mouse bile was supposed to help get rid

of ticks, as nasty as it smelled. How was she supposed to do this? She never had to deal with things like fleas and ticks before, especially not on other cats. She was completely clueless about how to get rid of them, but was sure it wouldn't be difficult to figure out.

"Oh great! I've got a nasty bugger stuck between my shoulder blades, and it's driving me batty," a black furred tom groaned, sitting up. His eyes showed tiredness, and his muzzle was beginning to grey. His joints cracked as he stretched and crept out of his wool nest to get a bit closer to the young apprentice. The old tom turned around, showing his back to Swiftpaw. She hesitated for a moment, unsure of what to do.
"Well? Are you going to get this tick off of me, or just stand there like an old tree all day?" he growled, his voice gravely with age and impatience. He turned his head around to glare at the patched she-cat, his green gaze baring into her. Swiftpaw shuffled her paws in uncertainty, her fur bristled as she drew closer the tom with caution. Using her nose, she started to part the fur on black tom's shoulders to find a rather large tick embedded into his skin. It looked as if it just about had it's fill of the elder tom, and Swiftpaw didn't see much of a reason to try and use the mouse bile to get rid of it. Instead she reached a paw up, batting at the tick to try and force it to fall off.

"What are you doing?" the tom snapped. "Are you mouse-brained? Use the bile, that's what you brought it for! Unless it's just a tasty little snack for a hungry little *kittypet*." The old tom's words were spat out like venom, stinging Swiftpaw with the harshness of his tone. Her tail wiggled in annoyance, and anger flared inside if her. But before she could snap at the elder, Poppycloud stood up and hissed at him.

"That's no way to treat the cat who is trying to help you, Smokesnout!" She snarled, ears folding back and fur bristling. She was acting like a queen defending her kit. For a moment Swiftpaw could see the warrior spirit shining inside this now old, frail queen. A wave of inspiration washed her, making her suppress a purr. Smokesnout's long tail lashed violently as he turned his hard green stare onto Poppycloud. Though he seemed angry, a tiny twinge of surprise could be read on his face. Perhaps being so quick to fight

was not usually in the old she-cat's nature. The two held each other's gaze for a few tense heartbeats, the air in the den thick with tension. That is until Swiftpaw spoke up.

"No, it's ok. I am being a mouse-brain. I don't know what I'm doing. But I'm at least trying to figure it out. So please, be patient while I try to get the tick off. Or I will leave you to take care of last." She picked up the bile with a claw, wondering what to do. Perhaps the awful scent of the stuff would be enough to force the tick to release its hold on Smokesnout. Firmly, she pressed the moss onto his shoulder blades, pulling it away a short while later to see the tick wiggling with disgust. Swiftpaw took the opportunity to scrape the fat bug off with a claw and squashed it once it fell to the ground. Smokesnout sighed with relief, standing to shake out his pelt. His tail swatted Swiftpaw in the face who let out a hiss in response. Smokesnout let out a soft chuckle, and the young molly wondered if he'd done that intentionally. With a snort, she stood and took the mouse bile over to the next elder, Poppycloud. She checked and cleaned the old she-cat of her ticks then took a moment to groom her with gratitude.

"Thank you," she whispered. Poppycloud purred, touching her nose to Swiftpaw's ear.

"No matter where you come from, or who your kin are, you are one of us now. You are a part of Grassclan and you must not allow anyone to discourage you from believing that."
The white and black patched molly nodded and licked the elder queen's shoulder respectfully. After, she moved on to the rest of the elders. Swiftpaw found herself spending the rest of the day with them, sharing tongues and listening to stories. Poppycloud took special care in telling tales of the clan's history while Meadowcall joined her by telling the apprentice about the other modern day clans. Another of the elders, Boulderfall, told funny tales about some of the clan's warriors and how they behaved when they were apprentices. He even recalled a time before Whitestar was leader. Swiftpaw felt like a kit again, listening to tales and having to be told about the world around her. But she was grateful, she didn't feel like much of an outsider anymore. By mid evening, Snowfrost, Goldensong, and Quailpaw came into the den. Snowfrost was

rolling a giant ball of wool while carrying some herbs in her jaws. She put her collection down to replace the elders bedding. Goldensong held a shrew in her mouth, delivering it to Poppycloud. Earlier the old golden she-cat had told Swiftpaw that she was Goldensong-and a warrior named Waspwing's-mother. Poppycloud thanked her daughter, licking her on the cheek. The pale golden medicine cat sat talking with her for a moment, worried about how she was feeling. But Poppycloud assured she was feeling fine aside for some aching joints, predicting a coming rainstorm. Snowfrost gave Goldensong some of her herbs to feed to her mother while she went to check on the rest of the old warriors. Swiftpaw noticed that she kept glancing back at Poppycloud and Goldensong as they both ate from the shrew, Poppycloud having more of the share. Quailpaw dragged a huge hare into the center of the den, dropping it in front of the elders with a pant. Hungrily they surrounded it, digging into their dinner while Snowfrost checked them over. Quailpaw then turned to Swiftpaw and reminded her of the time. The white and black patched she-cat rose to her paws and thanked the elders for everything before heading out. She made a quick trip to the medicine den to grab some wet moss to wash her paws and to say goodnight to Mistypaw before she finally went to the apprentice's den. Swiftpaw settled into her nest with legs tucked under herself. She closed her eyes and slowly drifted off to sleep. But before she did, she made a promise to herself that tomorrow she would hunt for Poppycloud.

Chapter 8

[image]

The promise Swiftpaw had made would never be fufilled. The next morning she was woken to join the dawn hunting patrol, following Chicorynose not too far from camp where she was put to work alongside her fellow apprentice, Heatherpaw. Today she was determined to catch more than she had the day before, working her stubby tail off to remember all the different hunting crouches for each piece of prey she could find. When she made her first successful catch of the day, Chicorynose told her something important.

"When you catch your prey, you must thank Starclan for the life it has given up to feed the clan."

"Why?" Swiftpaw asked curiously.

"It is part of our Warrior Code. Starclan has sent that prey and we must show our gratitude for them doing so. That prey has given it's life for us, just as the warriors of Starclan have."
Swiftpaw nodded in understanding and bowed her head over her prey. *Thank you, Starclan, for delivering this prey so that I may feed Poppycloud today and the rest of my clan forever*.
After her prayer, the apprentice went back to work. By the time the patrol had finished hunting it was mid morning. Clouds covered the sky now, the smell of rain was heavy on the horizon. Swiftpaw felt a chill run down her back, the patched fur along her spine stood on edge the closer they drew towards home. The unwarranted feeling of something being wrong consumed her again, just as it had the day before. Upon arrival to camp, the young molly planned to put all of her prey down onto the fresh-kill pile, except for a fat mouse she had reserved for the golden elder queen who had stood up for her. But when she walked through the bramble tunnel, Swiftpaw was met with a shocking surprise. The clan was gathered in the center of camp. Some cats were clustered in a group surrounding something while the rest of the clan looked on from the sidelines.

Chicorynose let out a gasp, quickly running over to speak with Whitestar who stood onlooking just by the base of the Tall Stone. Swiftpaw was left completely confused, wondering what was going on. She dropped off her prey with Heatherpaw and cautiously walked over to clanmates. She shouldered past some of them to get a glimpse at what all the fuss was about. There, laying on the cold hard ground was Poppycloud. Her eyes were shut and her body was positioned as if she were asleep. She looked so peaceful. But her flank was eerily still and a foul stench drifted from her, making Swiftpaw gag. She backed away a bit, tears beginning to form in her eyes. A realization dawned on her: Poppycloud was dead. *It doesn't make any sense!* Swiftpaw argued in her mind, drawing her ears back in shock. *She was perfectly fine yesterday, she even said so herself. Why is she dead?!* Swiftpaw's body shook with grief, but the need to know what caused the elder's death compelled her to seek answers. Her eyes scanned the crowd for a familiar pelt. Almost immediately she spotted the cat she originally sought out. Goldensong lay by Poppycloud's head, crying. She leaned her body into another golden cat's- whom Swiftpaw could only assume was Waspwing- and rested her muzzle against her dead mother's cheek. Another cat sat on the opposite side of her, sobbing harshly. The cat was none other than the elder warrior, Meadowcall. Her nose was buried in Poppycloud's still belly, nudging her lifeless body like a kit desperately trying to wake its mother.

"My sister, my sister! No, don't leave me! Starclan, give me back my sister!" Swiftpaw could hear her beg through her blubbering. A lump formed in the apprentice's throat. She couldn't find the strength in her to bother the grieving medicine cat about her mother's passing. Instead she searched for another, finding the fluffy silver pelt of the cat sitting nearby rather easily. She excused herself as she made her way through the crowd once more and over to Mistypaw.

"What happened to her?" Swiftpaw asked as she approached, her voice low, full of concern. Mistypaw did not dare turn away from facing her mentor, she simply glanced at the other apprentice for a quick heartbeat to acknowledge her.

"She died in her sleep," she responded simply. "Sometimes things

like this just happen with elders." For another heartbeat Mistypaw shifted her gaze onto the grieving elder and heaved a sigh. "Poor Meadowcall. Poppycloud was her twin. From what I've heard they were completely inseparable since birth. Meadowcall even joined Poppycloud in the nursery when she became pregnant, despite never having or wanting kits of her own. I just hope now that Poppycloud is in Starclan, she will not will herself to die to be with her sister again." Her pale green gaze shifted once more, this time down to her paws. Mistypaw crouched on her belly, eyes unfocused. "I can't handle seeing another cat die so soon. Or watch my mentor suffer as her kin pass on." Swiftpaw brought herself to sit beside her friend and pressed her side up against hers comfortingly. She rasped her tongue between her ears for a while to help calm her down. Empathy squeezed at Swiftpaw's heart. Though she had never experienced a death before, she knew what it felt like to be separated from her kin.

She knitted her brow as she concentrated on the thought, trying to remember her kithood. She recalled having siblings- *three* she reminded herself. Two tomkits and a mollykit. She remembered their almost pure white and black patched pelts, just like hers. Just like her mother's. She remembered feeling safe and warm with them, then devastated when her mother had told them they would be taken away. Swiftpaw's legs trembled slightly, as she recollected the day her littermates were taken, crying out for her and their mother. The fear that gripped her as she watched them get ripped out of their nest, and the feeling of loneliness that settled upon her the day after when she too had been taken.

Swiftpaw forced the fur on the back of her neck to lay flat. Her legs felt numb, but she forced herself to stand to take a shaky breath and calm down. Her eyes scanned the cats around her inattentively, landing on the familiar lynx point pelt of Snowfrost. The older molly was watching the scene from farther across camp, her face unreadable. A bundle of leaves was clutched in her jaws. For a moment, her icy blue eyes turned to meet Swiftpaw's own bright blues, chilling the young apprentice to the bone. Snowfrost rose to her paws and padded across camp over to Poppycloud's body. She placed the leaves on top of her with precision before turning her attention to Goldensong. She bent down to nudge and mew something inaudible into her old apprentice's ear which made Goldensong stand. Upon seeing the grief struck she-cat stir,

Swiftpaw noticed that something was wrong with her. The pale golden medicine cat's eyes looked glossed over, half lidded. Her legs were shaky; she could barely stand on her own, having to lean against Snowfrost for support. The older she-cat led her across the clearing, over to the medicine den where two of them disappeared out of sight. Though Swiftpaw had never experienced great grief before, she knew that that was not the way cats were supposed to act.

"Goldensong is ill," Mistypaw mewed quietly as if she had sensed what Swiftpaw was thinking. Swiftpaw whipped her head around to look at the silver apprentice. "I don't know what's wrong with her.... She's been that way since last night. I can't blame it on Poppycloud dying, nobody knew until the dawn patrol had returned. But I wonder what could have caused this. She was fine before. But now she's quiet, confused, and lethargic. I don't even think she can fully perceive what's going on..." Mistypaw sounded worried. Though her head remained lowered Swiftpaw noticed her face was scrawled with despair. For a heartbeat, she wondered if a sickness had made its way to the clan. A deadly one. Maybe that was what killed the elder queen an ailed the medicine cat. But Poppycloud had shown none of the symptoms Mistypaw described Goldensong expressing, so that could not be the case. Maybe Mistypaw was right, maybe she had died naturally. But then what was wrong with Goldensong?

"Let all cats old enough to run across the meadow, gather here beneath the Tall Stone for a clan meeting," Whitestar yowled suddenly, grabbing the attention of all of Grassclan. All those who were in the clearing tilted their heads to look up at their leader.

"Grassclan has suffered a tragic loss today. We will honor the life of Poppycloud and the legacy that she has left behind. Those closest to her may be excused from their duties to sit vigil until we bury her at sundown," she began, just as a soft rumble of thunder sounded from the sky, causing the cats of the clan to tense.
"I know that everyone is ready to make a mad dash to their dens to escape the soon to come rain, but there is one more issue I must address before we disband this meeting. Goldensong is sick, and from what Snowfrost has told me, she has been showing signs of it for a few days now."

From what I've seen, Goldensong hasn't been ill until today, Swiftpaw thought with a wiggle of her nubby black tail. She exchanged a quick, confused glance with Mistypaw before turning her eyes back up to her leader.
"Which is why, for the good of our clan and the education of our apprentice medicine cat...I must give Mistypaw to Snowfrost... to train until Goldensong has recovered." Whitestar concluded. Her tone sounded unpleasant, as if she had to force herself to make the announcement. Mistypaw tensed as Snowfrost emerged from the medicine den upon hearing her name. Mistypaw rose to her paws slowly and walked through the crowd over to the front of the Tall Stone to meet her there. Her head was held low and Swiftpaw could only guess that her friend wasn't happy to be given a new mentor. The two medicine cats stood in front if each other for a heartbeat, touching noses ceremoniously. *Something's not right here...* Swiftpaw thought, muscles tensing. Nobody cheered like they had for her apprentice ceremony. Whitestar's tail thrashed as she jumped down from her perch and between the two cats. Her tail swatted Snowfrost in a --not so-- accidental manner, earning a hiss from the medicine cat. Snowfrost moved to stand beside her new apprentice, telling her something Swiftpaw couldn't hear from her spot in the clearing. The patched molly was ready to walk over to them to check on Mistypaw, but just as she took a step forward a streak of lighting flashed across the sky. With that flash came the rain. It came down heavy, sending every cat in camp fleeing to the nearest den. Everyone was acting frantic, as if the rain was poisonous. Cats bumped into Swiftpaw as she pressed on, determined to reach her friend before she went inside. When she was almost there, a warrior rammed into her, knocking her down. Both cats skidded across the half dirt, half mud, with a dull squash.

"Watch it!" Hissed the warrior, a mostly white she-cat with small ginger and black spots along her back. She jumped to her feet and quickly pelted away into the warriors den without acknowledging the other molly a moment more. Swiftpaw stood up shortly after, her back leg hurting when she put her weight on it. Wet, dirty, and sore, the white and black patched molly limped to the apprentice's den. She shook mud and rain from her fur as she crawled through the rocks into shelter. She was surprised to see that all of the other apprentices had beat her inside already.

"Did you enjoy your mud bath?" Rabbitpaw snickered as he saw her filthy pelt, his tail-tip twitching with amusement. Swiftpaw twitched her whiskers and rolled her eyes as she slowly limped her way over to her nest. The other apprentices chuckled, shooting her sympathetic looks. The sound of the heavy rain pattered outside, a soft thrum echoing in the den as the apprentices settled down to get warm.

"It's odd how the rain started just after Whitestar made her announcement," Quailpaw noted, looking over at Frostpaw.

"Maybe it was a sign from Starclan!" Frostpaw exclaimed in response, her fluffy grey and white tabby fur pressed against Quailpaw. The two she-cats were sharing a nest at the moment; Swiftpaw guessed they were using each other for warmth.

"You should ask your sister," Quailpaw suggested with a thoughtful tilt of her head.

"Actually, I'm planning on speaking with her as soon as the storm breaks," Swiftpaw butted in as she turned around to clean herself. She checked on her leg, nosing at it to see if she felt as if it was broken. To her relief, touching it did not bring any sort of pain. She figured she must have pulled a muscle when she was slammed into the ground by that warrior.
"Hey, who's that white cat with the ginger and black spots?"

"That's Ladybugbite," replied Shadowpaw who was smoothing down some fur on his shoulder. "She's a fighting warrior. She might not look like much, but she's a hard hitter."

"You're telling me," Swiftpaw groaned, giving her leg a couple of swift licks. She wondered how long it would be until she would be made a warrior. Quailpaw and Heatherpaw were about ten moons each, so she knew it would have to be sometime after that. Would being a warrior make her less sympathetic towards those that were hurt, those that were lost? Swiftpaw's mind drifted back to Poppycloud as the thought came to her. The golden elder had been a sweetheart to Swiftpaw from the moment she had arrived. Even to a complete stranger she showed benevolence. There was no way that she could have been heartless in her prime as a warrior. This

thought brought Swiftpaw some peace. She wouldn't let violence and the call of battle harden her heart when she'd become a warrior, no matter what she'd go through. *Thank you for the kindness you have shown me in the short while that I knew you, Poppycloud. I hope you are watching over us all from Starclan.* Swiftpaw rested her head down in her nest. Her eyelids drooped shut and sleep swiftly found its way to her.

The feeling of a nose poking her side roused Swiftpaw from her nap. The sound of rain still rang through the silence of the den. Drowsily, the white and black patched she-cat let out a groan.

"Chicorynose, do we have to go out in this rain?" She whined quietly, her voice cracking from fatigue.

"Actually, I'm not Chicorynose," responsed the cat who had woken her. An unfamiliar scent drifted into Swiftpaw's nose, forcing her to peel open her eyes to look up at the stranger. A white cat with silver patched fur towered over her, head bending down to look at the young molly face to face.

"My name's Dewstone. I'm the clan's Code Keeper. I have a favor to ask of you," the she-cat mewed carefully, her tone quiet. Swiftpaw figured the rest of her denmates had the same idea she had and went to sleep which prompted the Code Keeper to be quiet. Swiftpaw lifted her head to better focus on Dewstone.

"How can I help?"
Dewstone gave a quick glance behind her, checking on the other cats before turning her attention back onto the young she-cat.

"Whitestar would like you to look out for your friend Mistypaw and her littermates. She suspects something is going on that involves them and needs someone that's a close friend to let her know if anything weird happens." Swiftpaw nodded along. *So Whitestar thinks something isn't right too.*

"Don't worry, I'll keep an eye on them."

Chapter 9

[image]

It had been almost a half moon since Swiftpaw joined Grassclan. Every waking moment since, she found her days bustling with activity. Her daily tasks mostly consisted of practicing her hunting and teamwork skills with Chicorynose and the other apprentices outside of camp. During that time she especially took care to watch out for the littermates Mistypaw, Frostpaw, and Rabbitpaw. She would often find herself paired with or on patrol with either of the warrior apprentices, much to Rabbitpaw's displeasure. Though neither of them were a fitting match for her as a partner. Rabbitpaw was too focused on doing things strictly as he was told, while Frostpaw was much more easily distracted. Swiftpaw didn't mind much, she knew her friend was much more interested in taking Quailpaw as a partner, and she would rather deal with any other cat than Rabbitpaw. But she wanted to keep her promise to Dewstone, the Code Keeper-which she had soon learned was a very important clan role. So far nothing fishy was going on-at least not with them. Mistypaw, on the other paw, was a bit of a different case. She was the cat that Swiftpaw wanted to spend time with most out of the three, but often she found herself to be ripped away from the fluffy silver molly. Mistypaw was constantly kept busy by her new mentor, Snowfrost, who drilled her relentlessly on the functions of different herbs and demonstrated how the body worked with leftover prey from the fresh-kill pile. It seemed like Snowfrost was doing all she could to keep the young apprentice's attention on her and away from everyone else. That seemed to be pretty suspicious. It wasn't in the way Swiftpaw had observed mentors treating their apprentices. It was much more personal than that, and it made the white and black patched she-cat feel uneasy. When Swiftpaw reported the behavior to Dewstone and Whitestar, Dewstone told her the behavior was normal. Medicine cats were apparently supposed to be close like kin, and from an adoptive standpoint Mistypaw and Snowfrost were related through Jaybird. But Swiftpaw didn't buy it. And it seemed like Whitestar didn't either. Though she did not speak up about it, the look in her pale

blue eyes and the irritated twitching of her tail-tip said it all. Swiftpaw nodded at her, silently promising to keep a closer eye on the situation.
When given the chance, she observed that when Mistypaw wasn't distracted by learning, she was taking care of Goldensong. The pale golden she-cat still lay ill in a nest in the medicine den. Her condition did not worsen, thankfully, but it never seemed to improve either. It was clear that Mistypaw was worried, and a small pang of sympathy tugged at Swiftpaw's heart. She knew now how strong the bond between a mentor and apprentice was. Goldensong was a perfect match for Mistypaw, from what Swiftpaw had heard. From her perspective, Snowfrost was too aggressive with the more gentle apprentice. Mistypaw worked her tail off just to please her, with little luck; she seemed so frustrated by the lack of commendation. Swiftpaw prayed to Starclan for Goldensong to recover already.
To help Mistypaw calm down, every once in a while Swiftpaw would accompany her into the meadow to gather herbs. The activity itself was dull, but Swiftpaw enjoyed the quality time they got to spend together. She'd let Mistypaw complain to her about Snowfrost, and in return she'd talk about her days as a warrior apprentice.

"How's everything going with your training?" Mistypaw asked one day when they had gone out to collect dandelions.

"Training is great. Though, I wish I could learn how to fight already," Swiftpaw admitted, pushing around a little pebble she found on the ground as they walked. Mistypaw tilted her head, perplexed.

"Chicorynose hasn't taught you yet?" Swiftpaw shook her head and gave a shrug.
"It's probably just her training method. Some warriors develop a special regimen for their apprentices. But you really should ask Chicorynose about it, I'm sure it's frustrating not being able to defend the clan properly," she urged as she turned to face her friend.
"For now, I don't want us to think about anything clan related. Lets just try and have a good time while we can." As slowly as a snail,

Mistypaw lifted a paw before abruptly booping the other she-cat's nose.
"Tag, you're it!" She giggled, briskly bouncing away from Swiftpaw.
Swiftpaw blinked in confusion for a heartbeat. As she registered what just happened she squealed and happily went after Mistypaw, kicking up grass as she bounded after her with a glee filled giggle.

It was mid-day when the two she-cats returned back to camp, carrying dandelions in their jaws. The lovely smell but bitter taste of the herb made Swiftpaw's eyes and mouth water. Luckily she didn't have to deal with it much longer as she followed Mistypaw into the medicine den to drop off their supply. As Swiftpaw bent down to release the yellow flowers from her grip, a head popped into the den.

"Oh good, you're back!" Meowed Chicorynose. "Come find me when you're done in here." Swiftpaw exchanged a glance with Mistypaw and headed towards the exist, wiggling her tail in farewell as she slipped past the ivy veil.
Standing before her in the clearing was her mentor, looking as pleasant as usual. Swiftpaw wanted to take a moment to get the taste of dandelion out of her mouth before they'd go out to train, pausing in her stride to lap at a puddle a foxlength away from the medicine den. Last night it had rained; grey clouds still hung in the sky. Though they were dissipating, promising to be gone come night fall. With the bitter taste of herb removed from her mouth, Swiftpaw came to stand beside Chicorynose just as she began to pad away.
The fawn she-cat didn't tell her where they were going this time or what they were going to do today. Instead she led her apprentice across the meadow silently in the direction of the Forest Patch. *Not more hunting practice,* Swiftpaw groaned. Her pawsteps slowed, boredom weighing her down. But to her surprise, Chicorynose stopped her long before they even came within sight of the oak trees of the Forest Patched. Instead the two she-cats paused in front of a wide ditch. Down below, Swiftpaw made out the shapes of the other Grassclan apprentices and their mentors. Without even looking back, Chicorynose skidded down the wall of the channel, kicking up a mix of half mud, half dry dirt as she made her way to the bottom. When the dust cleared, the fawn molly turned around,

looking back up at Swiftpaw from below. Swiftpaw puffed up her chest as she too began to make her decent down into the ditch. Her claws unsheathed to tether her to the earth and keep her from rolling down the slope like a pebble. Dirt clumped up in between her claws and paw pads as she skidded to a clumsy halt on the earth. Her pelt was dotted with mud from the spray she created on the way down. Looking at her own state caused her to momentarily pause to clean herself up.

"Welcome to The Dip," meowed Chicorynose, introducing the new area of Grassclan they now found themselves in. "here's where the apprentices normally train. I thought you'd might like a change of scenery today, Swiftpaw."

"Maybe if she finishes grooming sometime soon, we can start battle practice before Leafbare comes around again," commented Rabbitpaw's mentor Gingerstrike humorously. At the mention of battle Swiftpaw's ears pricked. At last she would learn how to fight! The young molly sprang back onto her paws with a quickness. Her legs trembled with anticipation, the edges of her mouth tugging back into a smile.

"Normally, Grassclan warriors fight in pairs. But today you will all be battling against each other," meowed Sheeptail as he circled around the other cats in The Dip.

"Heatherpaw and Quailpaw, why don't you two demonstrate how battle practice works?" Heatherpaw's mentor Waspwing suggested. The two she-cats nodded in unison, taking to opposite sides of the ditch. Sheeptail herded the other cats to the wall to give the apprentices more room.
"Begin."

At the command, Heatherpaw lunged at Quailpaw. She jumped, ready to land on the other she-cat's back, but Quailpaw had a plan. The tabby she-cat ducked forward, turning tail and twisted around, scraping a hind paw-with claws sheathed- against Heatherpaw's belly. Heatherpaw yowled in surprise, falling to the floor a tail length away. She sprang back onto her feet, crouching, ready to pounce again. But this time it was Quailpaw who pounced. At first it looked as if she would try to land on Heatherpaw, but instead she

leaped over her, falling onto her belly. She kicked out, knocking the other apprentice's feet out from under her. Heatherpaw collapsed, and Quailpaw took the opportunity to spring on top of her. She grabbed her by her scruff, only to be flipped over and squashed under Heatherpaw's sudden weight. The lilac molly held her opponent down for a few heartbeats, one paw on her cheek and another on her flank.

"Well done," Tigerfang praised, approaching them. At once, the sisters relaxed, standing beside each other. *That sure looks like fun!* Swiftpaw squealed quietly, fighting the urge to bounce and beg for a turn like a kit.

"Frostpaw, Rabbitpaw, and Swiftpaw. You three will work with me and Cloverpetal on learning some moves for a bit while the others practice some more advanced strategies," meowed Waspwing, herding the newer apprentices to one side of The Dip.
The three cats worked hard, learning how to attack and defend for the very first time. Swiftpaw stumbled a bit when it came to attacking, but quickly picked up a couple of ideas to try when it was finally time for her first mock battle. She'd let the warriors think she was a clumsy fighter for now, if only to surprise them later on.

"Great job, all of you!" Praised the calico molly Cloverpetal. "I think they're ready to try their paw at a real fight." Waspwing nodded in agreement. The tom padded away to discuss the decision with the other mentors. Meanwhile, Swiftpaw stood watching with exhilaration. Maybe she'd get a chance at a rematch with Shadowpaw. It already felt like seasons had passed since they had first met and fought. Swiftpaw recalled how frightened she was when she first caught whiff of the lanky black tom; but now the thought seemed so silly. Shadowpaw was as harmless as a butterfly, and a pretty fun cat to spend time with. The two were already great friends, and it had only been half a moon since she had been apprenticed. Despite this, the thought of facing Shadowpaw in a mock battle was invigorating.
After a while the tom in question, along with the other apprentices and mentors, met up once again in the center of The Dip.

"Alright, 'Paws, this is what we're going to do," Chicorynose began,

turning her gaze onto each young cat in turn. "Each of you will be paired off with another apprentice, and the two of you will fight with claws sheathed. This will give us a good idea of how well you can handle yourselves, and what we'll need to work on in your next training session."

"The pairings will be as followed: Frostpaw, you'll be up against Heatherpaw. Quailpaw, you're up against Shadowpaw. And Rabbitpaw, you'll be facing Swiftpaw," declared Tigerfang. Disappointment settled upon Swiftpaw as she was paired off with Rabbitpaw instead of Shadowpaw. She was sure the tom was happy to gain her as an opponent, as it seemed he disliked her. He would probably enjoy nothing more than to be given the chance to kick what little tail she had. Gingerstrike and Chicorynose circled around the two apprentices, driving the other cats to the sidelines.

"You two are up first," announced Gingerstrike. *Oh great*, Swiftpaw thought, getting into a defensive stance. It must have been obvious that she was nervous because she could have sworn she saw a glint of satisfaction in Rabbitpaw's eyes.
"Swiftpaw, you'll be on defense. Pretend Rabbitpaw is an invading warrior, trying to infiltrate our camp." Swiftpaw saw Rabbitpaw flex his claws momentarily, smirking. His eyes now sparkled with mischief. In response, she narrowed her eyes at him, nodding in response to Gingerstrike.
"You may begin."
The fluffy lynx point tom wasted no time in charging towards Swiftpaw. She managed to move out of the way, if only momentarily. Rabbitpaw swiftly turned himself back around to get at her again, quicker than Swiftpaw had time to react. With ease, her bowled her over, sending her tumbling in the mud. Swiftpaw quickly got to her paws, shaking herself out. She let out a battle cry, lunging forward in retaliation. The white and black patched molly swiped at Rabbitpaw's muzzle, purposely missing to make him flinch. While his eyes were closed she leaped, landing on the fluffy tom's back. She acted as if she were clawing him with her back paws, kicking the back of his head. She imagined attacking a real warrior as she did so, which made her blows land that much harder. Mud from her pelt caked itself to the fluffy tom's fur; Swiftpaw imagined it being blood gushing out of her enemy's

wounds. Rabbitpaw snarled, and suddenly dropped to the floor. He rolled out from under Swiftpaw and turned, nipping at her back leg. The white and black patched she-cat let out a yowl, pain shooting up her leg. He really bit her! Anger burned in Swiftpaw's belly. Recklessly she turned like a tempestuous badger, spitting as she drew closer to strike her opponent, but she left herself open for attack. Rabbitpaw countered her by launching a front paw blow. Only he forgot himself in the heat of the moment, unsheathing his claws. Before Swiftpaw could dodge, the tom's claws came down on her, cutting her ear and scratching a bit of her head. Swiftpaw hissed in pain, shuffling backwards. She crouched on the ground, squeezing her eyes shut. A bead of blood trickled down her ear.

"Alright that's enough," meowed Chicorynose, stepping in between the two cats before Rabbitpaw could attack again.
"You both did well, but you've got a lot to learn. Go sit beside the others and rest. Next up let's have Shadowpaw and Quailpaw take their turn."

The walk home from the Dip was painful for Swiftpaw. Her pelt was filthy and her injuries stung, but her pride felt far worse. Nobody had said it, but she knew she had been beaten. She just couldn't wrap her head around it. What went wrong? She thought she performed all the moves right, throwing in a bit of her own ideas to be more unpredictable. She'd been in a fight before too, so she knew a little bit about what she was doing. And yet Rabbitpaw had managed to defeat her with only a bit of trouble. Maybe it was because before she had fought in fear for her life, but with Rabbitpaw it had only been for practice. *Clawing practice is more like it*, she thought to herself bitterly, flicking her ripped ear.

"What's got you down, Swift?" asked Chicorynose as she came to walk beside her apprentice, pulling the young cat from her thoughts. Swiftpaw glanced at her momentarily before turning her gaze forward without a word. Her bright blue eyes were clouded with shame.
"You know, even the greatest warriors lose sometimes," the fawn molly pointed out. "And hey, not all of them come out with a neat new scar. That ear of yours will be quite the conversation starter."
Again, Swiftpaw glanced at her. Chicorynose did have a point, this

single defeat wasn't really worth sulking over. It was her first official day of practice after all.

"Maybe. Thanks, Chicorynose," she mewed quietly, giving her a small smile. She took a moment to examine her mentor's face as they walked. For the first time it registered that Chicorynose was also scarred on her ear-on the opposite one to Swiftpaw's. It was deep, almost splitting across the full width of the ear. How she had managed to salvage all if it, the young molly would never know. Chicorynose nudged her shoulder with her own playfully.

"That's what mentors are for. Boosting the confidence of apprentices and turning them into the best warriors they can be. Now, my little warrior, when we get into camp I want you to march yourself straight to the medicine den and have those wounds looked at. I know you're eager to get a few scars on your pelt already, but the last thing we need is for you to get an infection."

"Yes, mom," Swiftpaw replied sarcastically, rolling her eyes in a playful manner. Again, Chicorynose nudged her shoulder, chuckling warmheartedly.

Chapter 10

[image]

Making her way through the bramble tunnel proved itself to be more difficult as she returned home. Pain shot up Swiftpaw's leg as it snagged on a bit of the brambles as she made her way inside. Her ear burned as she turned and accidentally scraped the sensitive open wound against a thorn. As commanded, she took herself right over to the medicine den with no argument as soon as she was safely in camp. She had grown so accustomed to just walking inside and seeing Mistypaw that she didn't even think twice about it until she saw that the fluffy silver she-cat wasn't there. She blinked as she registered that it was only Snowfrost who was left in the den, as well as an unconscious Goldensong. Snowfrost was busying herself with checking her herb stock when she scented Swiftpaw's blood. Her ears pricked out of instinct and she immediately knew which herbs to grab. Without even speaking to Swiftpaw, the lynx point molly already had a spread ready for her.

"You there, come sit," she commanded, pointing to an empty fern nest with her tail-tip. Swiftpaw hobbled her way over to it and sat down, leaving her bad leg to stick out a more comfortable angle. Snowfrost approached her, giving her ear and foreleg a sniff.

"What happened?"

"I was battle training and things got a little more intense than they should have," Swiftpaw replied. Snowfrost only responded with a small "*hm*" before dragging a pile of flower petals resting on a leaf in front of her with her paw. She bent down, taking a couple of them into her mouth. She began to chew, spitting them back out onto another leaf. She dabbed her paw into the freshly made poultice, smearing it onto Swiftpaw's bite wound. The white and black patched molly hissed in response.

"That stings!" she spat. Snowfrost fixed her with a hard glare.

"I know, calm down" she growled. "it's supposed to. That means its

killing any dirt that might infect the wound. Now keep still, I'm not done with you yet." Snowfrost picked up some more of the petals. This time she grabbed them with her claw, pressing them to Swiftpaw's ear. She squeezed them, the juices flowing into the v-shaped cut and the scratches on her scalp. Swiftpaw winced, resisting the urge to flick her ear.

"What even is that stuff?" she grumbled through gritted teeth, trying to distract herself while the medicine cat worked on her.

"It's marigold," the silver lynx point she-cat informed her as she took some cobwebs to dress Swiftpaw's wounds. "You're lucky I even have any to use at this time. In a few days I'm going to need you to go with Mistypaw to find some, my supplies are running low. For now, I think there'll be enough to last until the new flowers bloom. As long as you don't plan on going around and getting yourself hurt again. Who was the one who attacked you?"

"Rabbitpaw," Swiftpaw responded bitterly. "I guess he got me pretty good."

"Rabbitpaw, hm? I always knew he'd turn out to make a fine future warrior." Snowfrost's tone oddly softened as she spoke of the fluffy tom, like a queen bragging about her kits.
"But yes, he did 'get you pretty good.' You ear will be permanently cut open, there's nothing I can do about that. The most I can do is keep infection away while it heals. I think you should stay in here and rest for the remainder of the day. I don't want you jumping around and messing up your dressings while tussling with your friends. Those herbs are too precious to waste." Swiftpaw parted her jaws, about to protest, but was quickly silence with a challenging glare. The young apprentice laid down, tucking her legs under herself. She watched as the lynx point medicine cat gathered what was left of her herbs and put them away. She listened to her quietly count her stock, taking mental notes of what to fetch later with Mistypaw.

"Poppy seeds," Snowfrost whispered at one point, drawing Swiftpaw's attention even more. "I definitely need more poppy seeds. I was sure I had more than this. Where did they all go?"
That was strange, Swiftpaw remembered Mistypaw and a warrior

named Cowpatch bringing some back fairly recently. A "collecting" warrior, she remembered him being referred to as. What did that even mean? Swiftpaw reminded herself to find that out later. For now, she was more focused on a more pressing question. How was Snowfrost running low on poppy seeds so soon? *Cats only take one or two at a time*, she recalled Mistypaw telling her. If she remembered right, they were used to help cats calm down and to ease pain. She hasn't heard of many cats needing them within the tine that she'd been around. An unexpected, eerie feeling settled itself upon Swiftpaw, making the fur on the back of her neck stand up involuntarily. It was a perplexing; nothing was wrong right now whatsoever, not that she knew of anyhow. Swiftpaw groomed her chest fur, willing herself to calm down. she needed something to distract herself from the feeling.

"Hey, Snowfrost?" she mewed quietly. The lynx point medicine cat turned her head to look at her. "Can you explain what a collecting warrior is?"

Snowfrost stared at her for a heartbeat. "That's an out of the blue question, but... alright. A collecting warrior is just as it sounds. Warriors who take up that job assist cats by fetching things they need. They often come to me for herbs for the elders or to bring to me, or fetch bedding for the elders and queens."
That made sense, Swiftpaw realized she should have been able to figure that out by herself. But this was a good distraction for her, just what she needed. As much as she didn't like Snowfrost, she had to admit the older molly knew her stuff. Now Swiftpaw had a new question to ask.

"I didn't know warriors could take up different jobs. What other jobs are there?"

Snowfrost sighed and turned around to fully face the curious apprentice. She sat down, wrapping her plumed tail around her paws neatly, her herbs forgotten for the time being.
"This really is something your mentor should be teaching you about. But, since I am the one whose keeping you here, I might as well entertain you." The look on her silver tabby masked face showed boredom for the subject, but Snowfrost pressed on, if only to get Swiftpaw to shut up and leave her alone afterwards.

"There are many jobs you can take on once you are made a warrior. Before your ceremony on the day of your final assessment, you tell Whitestar what you wish to do with your career once you are named," she began to explain, with Swiftpaw hanging on her every word.
"To start, there are your typical jobs: Hunting, and Fighting, I'm sure those need no explanation. There is also Guarding, which again is self explanatory. Though from what I hear it can be a tougher job than it seems. You get to watch over our most vulnerable dens, and accompany medicine cats or the leader if they must travel across the border to address another clan. Next there are the more unique jobs. There are the Spy warriors; cats who do what they can to learn secrets about those who may being doing wrong, or are an enemy to the clan. There are the Listeners and Watchers, who go out on patrol and use their special skill in either sight or hearing to aid in things such as border checks and hunting. Den Keepers are very important cats to the clan; they are the warriors who make sure our dens are in order, and help with repairs when a part of camp becomes messy or broken." Snowfrost lifted a paw to groom as she continued.
"Another important job is the Code Keeper-"

"Oh oh I know about Code Keepers!" Swiftpaw interrupted. "Dewstone told me about it. The Code Keeper helps the leader and deputy keep law and order by upholding the Warrior Code to an extent where they make it their job to enforce it." She beamed, proud of herself for remembering. Snowfrost twitched her whiskers.

"Yes, very good. After that, there is the Den Mother, who is the most experienced permanent queen in the nursery. Den Mother is a highly respected role in the clan, they are the one responsible for all the kits and queens, and are the most trusted cat in the clan to turn to when you have a problem. And finally, there are the History Keepers; cat who remember all the lore and greatest battles the Land' Star has ever seen."
Swiftpaw's eyes sparkled with wonder as she listened to Snowfrost speak. There were so many different things she could do when she'd become a warrior, how would she know what job was right for her to choose? Her head was spinning from the thought.

"Help!" A cry snapped Swiftpaw out of her daze. Snowfrost swung around to face the mouth of the medicine den. Through the ivy veil came a light brown tabby queen, carrying a mewling bundle of brown fur in her jaws. Worry shone in her yellow eyes as she looked at Swiftpaw then at Snowfrost. She padded up to the lynx point molly, gently placing the kit at her paws.

"What is problem now, Cricketsong?" She asked, sounding a bit annoyed. Her tail-tip twitched as if out of impatience. Did Cricketsong bother her a lot?

"My brown kit has a thorn stuck in her rear!" She cried.

"The wool from your nest must have snagged on the brambles when it was brought into camp," Snowfrost explained, bending down to yank out the thorn. She took the tiny prick between her teeth, tugging it out swiftly. The kit let out a sharp squeak of surprise, mewling less than she had when she was first brought to the den. Snowfrost turned to grab another marigold petal out of her stockpile. She took it between her paws and milked it for its juices, squeezing it onto the tiny cut on the kit.

"There now. She should be alright."

"How could you let this happen?" Cricketsong growled at her, ears drawing back in displeasure.

"How could I let your kit be healed?" Snowfrost asked with voice monotone, flicking an ear.

"No!" The brown tabby queen snapped. "That wool came from a wad kept in *your* den. How could you not check it over before giving it to an apprentice to line my nest? That thorn could have poked one of my kits' eyes out!"

"Watch your tone," Snowfrost chided. "I have done nothing wrong. I am a very busy cat, I don't have time for menial tasks like examining wool."

"Why not have Mistypaw look it over?" Swiftpaw chimed in. The two older she-cats whipped their heads around to look at her.

"Mistypaw has no time for it either. She is even busier than I am, learning and herb gathering and the like," Snowfrost replied, lashing her tail. Her tone changed to one of irritation. The mollies turned their attention back onto each other, staring each other down.
"If you are so worried about finding thorns in your nest then why don't *you* look it over?" Snowfrost challenged. Cricketsong scoffed. As the two she-cats bickered back and forth, a tiny voice piped up over the other cats's. Swiftpaw glanced down to see Cricketsong's kit toddling over to her.

"Hi!" She squeaked, voice high and soft with youth. "Who you?"

Swiftpaw sat up in her nest to look down at the kitten.

"I'm Swiftpaw," she chriped, blinking slowly.

"Meddie cat?" The brown kit asked, tilting her head back to gaze up at the patched she-cat who towered over her.

"No, I'm a warrior apprentice."
The kit's soft blue eyes sparkled with awe. She giggled, pointing at herself with a paw. She was only a half moon old and already excited about becoming an apprentice someday. She could barely even talk yet.

"You're so cute," Swiftpaw trilled, bending down to give the kit a lick between the ears. "Run along to your mommy now." But the kitten made no effort to leave. Instead she waddled up to Swiftpaw, settling herself down in the nest beside her. She let out a soft, content sigh before curling up and closing her eyes. Swiftpaw blink then gave a shrug, laying back down. She listened to the argument between Snowfrost and Cricketsong die down until Cricketsong was ready to leave. She whipped her head around, as if looking for something.

"My kit, she's gone!" She wailed.

"She's right here," Swiftpaw mewed softly, tilting her head to point out the brown kit napping beside her. Cricketsong sighed with relief, padding up to the nest. She picked her daughter up by the

scruff, briefly dipping her head in thanks to Swiftpaw. She then turned tail and pranced towards the mouth of the den, pausing for a heartbeat to shoot Snowfrost a nasty glare before leaving, nose stuck up in the air snobbishly.

"Mouse-brain," Snowfrost muttered with a lash of her tail, bringing her attention back to her herb stock at long last.
A while past by. Swiftpaw grew bored of watching the medicine cat sort through plants, falling asleep from lack of interest. A familiar, sweet scent soon tickled her nostrils, rousing her from slumber. Mistypaw mewed a hello to her mentor as she entered the den, dropping dock and bark at her paws. Swiftpaw stood up in her nest, ready to greet and speak with her friend. She hadn't seen her all day, and was excited to chat. But before she could say anything, Snowfrost meowed,
"Swiftpaw, you're free to go back to your duties. I can't have you crowding the den anymore."
Rude! Swiftpaw thought, a growl rising from her throat. But she didn't argue. The white and black patched molly simply glanced at Mistypaw as she stalked out of the den and out into the fresh Newleaf air. She hadn't realized just how much time she had spent inside the medicine den; it was almost completely dark out already. The full moon began to rise over the horizon, shining cool light over the camp. The light decorated the clearing in a dazzling display of black and silver, the likes of which Swiftpaw had never seen before.

"All cats old enough to travel across the meadow gather here beneath Tall Stone for a clan meeting!" Whitestar called unexpectedly. The light of the rising moon reflected off her pelt, making her appear to glow in its light as she climbed to the stone's peak. The clan gathered around the ancient boulder to look up at their leader. Apprentices pushed their way to the front, excited to hear the night's announcement. Mistypaw and Snowfrost emerged from their den, the queens across camp pushed their way into the crowd, and elders crowded behind the rest of the clan. Swiftpaw followed her friends closer to Tall Stone, tilting her head back to gaze at the she-cat above them.
"I have decided who shall be attending the Gathering tonight," Whitestar announced, scanning the crowd with her pale blue eyes.

"What's a Gathering?" Swiftpaw whispered to Frostpaw who was sitting beside her now. Frostpaw flicked her tail, glancing at the white and black patched she-cat.

"The Gathering is a meeting held once every full moon. There, we meet with the other four clans, and learn about what's been going on in their territories," she whispered back. Swiftpaw parted her jaws to ask more questions, but was shushed by a cat sitting behind her before she could get another word out.

"As usual, those who are named, meet by the camp exit in a single file line, with Chicorynose taking the lead. Snowfrost, Mistypaw, Ryestep, Gingerstrike, Ashwhisker, Jaybird, Tigerfang, Waspwing, Slugsnout, Meadowcall, Tornface, Sheeptail, Shadowpaw, Frostpaw, Rabbitpaw, and Swiftpaw shall all be coming with us tonight."

Swiftpaw's fur began to stand on end out of astonishment. *I'm going to see the other clans*?

Chapter 11

[image]

The apprentices surrounding Swiftpaw purred loudly with elation while the white and black patched she-cat stared off into space, flabbergasted. She felt so honored to be picked to go to the Gathering, and though she could barely wrap her head around what a Gathering was, her whiskers quivered in delight. She followed her friends over to the bramble barrier which protected the camp with a skip in her step. Her mind wandered as she padded along, wondering what meeting the other clans would be like. Though quickly she was distracted from her thoughts. Towards her left she noticed Rabbitpaw was speaking with Frostpaw, a quiver in his mew.

"Will you stay close to me when we get to the Gathering Clearing?" He asked in an unusually meek voice.

"Of course!" Frostpaw beamed. "I won't let you outta my sight even for a heartbeat. And if I do, mama will be there with us." Rabbitpaw dipped his head in gratitude, bumping his muzzle against his sister's shoulder. Frostpaw gave his ear a lick and giggled, mouthing "*he's such a kit*" at the other apprentices. The rest of those who were called to attend the Gathering stepped into a single file line by the bramble tunnel, as ordered. Swiftpaw brought up the rear of the patrol, beckoned over by Shadowpaw who stood two cats ahead of her. Whitestar approached her cats, pacing along the line, ordering those who were not directly behind the cat in front of them to straighten themselves out. *This is kind of weird*, Swiftpaw thought. Did all clans do stuff like this? When Whitestar was satisfied by the order of the line, the siamese she-cat took the lead, exiting the bramble tunnel and padding down the hill. The rest of the chosen Grassclan cats followed. Those who were older never broke formation, while the apprentices occasionally stepped out of line. When they would, they were herded back into place by Chicorynose, who circled around the patrol as they made their way northwards. The cats walked perfectly in a row across the silver

bathed meadow, over the Twoleg bridge, and into a part of the Forest Patch Swiftpaw had never been to before. The trees were much denser here, pine and birch dominating the landscape along with shrubs. Occasionally Frostpaw and Rabbitpaw's long fur would snag on a bush or thorn, slowing the back of the patrol-mainly Swiftpaw-down. Chicorynose would untangle the mess, only for another one of the fluffy apprentices to get caught a few bear lengths ahead.
The trek to the place Swiftpaw had heard was called the Gathering Clearing was long, but pleasant. The full moon shined overhead, the view only obstructed by pine needles and tree blossoms. Eventually, the trees began to thin out again, leading way to a wall of shrubbery. Whitestar made no hesitation walking through a hole in the foliage, and neither did anyone else. When it was Swiftpaw's turn to walk through the undergrowth, a powerful scent smacked her in the snout. Or rather, many powerful scents. As the patched molly made her way into the clearing a breathtaking sight filled her vision. Everywhere she looked there were more cats that she had ever seen before.

"Wow look at all these cats!" Frostpaw gasped, fur fluffing with astonishment.

"Whoa look, those must be the deputies of the other clans," Shadowpaw mewed.

"Where?" Swiftpaw asked, eyes scanning the crowd. Shadowpaw nudged her with his shoulder, nodding towards a group of three cats.
"Right there by the base of Split Rock. The yellow one is Sandybreeze, the smokey black one is Bearclaw, and the last is Thornberry. Chicorynose will be sitting with them soon."
Swiftpaw followed Shadowpaw's gaze over to the back of clearing. The cats there certainly seemed to have an air of authority to them. The young she-cat examined the deputies as best she could, taking special notice in Thornberry who had a nubby tail, just like hers. Happiness swelled inside the white and black patched molly, she didn't feel so out of place anymore. Swiftpaw's eyes began to wander some more. Towards her left she recognized the smell of Treeclan, spotting a group of their warriors clustered nearby. She

was no stranger to Treeclan, Swiftpaw had visited their border a few times to remark the trees. Sometimes patrols would jump down from the branches above, each time forcing Swiftpaw to study those who presented themselves to her. *Learn about your enemies, remember their faces and smells* she remembered Chicorynose telling her. To her right was another cluster of warriors, with a scent she didn't recognize. It was fishy, reeking of saltwater. It didn't take a lot of thought to put the pieces together and recognize those cats as members of a clan rightfully called Oceanclan. A lot of those cats had long, oily fur which was ticked with minuscule particles of sand. Their limbs were long and powerful, and their voices boomed even from halfway across the clearing. Swiftpaw stayed close to her clanmates, awaiting order, kneading the ground impatiently. Her pelt twitched with excitement as she continued to explore the clearing with her eyes, waiting to be released to go explore.

"You may go and mingle. Apprentices, remember: learn what you can and reveal very little in return. If a warrior tries to intimidate you, band together or walk away and find a trusted clanmate. You are all dismissed." Whitestar padded away across the clearing, brown plumed tail kinked over her back. Swiftpaw watched her disappear into the crowd, only to appear again, jumping onto Split Rock. The stone looked as if it had been cut into five perfect pieces, decorated in ways that oddly represented each clan. There with Whitestar sat three other cats: one had blazing ginger and white fur, with eyes as orange as a sunset. The next was a cat with a flat face, their fur was long and silver with their tail being a darker shade of grey, and their eyes a pale slate blue. The third cat was massive, with long, dark grey tabby and white fur and beautiful sun yellow eyes. Swiftpaw assumed those must be the leaders Meadowcall had told her about. *Blazestar, Fogstar, and Wavestar, cool!* Swiftpaw wondered what the last leader looked like. *Meadowcall said he's a she-cat turned tom. Littlestar was his name I think.* Soon, she knew, she'd get a glimpse of the leader. For now she wanted nothing more than to take advantage of the opportunity presented to her and get to know cats from the other clans. Swiftpaw sprang forward, weaving her way around groups of cats big and small with Shadowpaw at her heels, yowling at her to slow down. But she didn't, eagerness guided her pawsteps, demanding she keep moving forward to see all that a Gathering had to offer. From all the talk

she had heard about the clans being rivals, nobody seemed to show it. Swiftpaw spotted Ashwhisker and Jaybird conversing with some she-cats by an old fallen birch tree. Chicorynose made her way over to Split Rock and settled beside Thornberry, her shoulders shaking with laughter from something one of the other cats must have said.

"C'mon, I want to introduce you to some of the other apprentices," Shadowpaw meowed to Swiftpaw as he finally caught up with her, touching his tail to her shoulder to grab her attention. Athirst, she followed her friend's lead, tail stump held high. The Grassclan apprentices made their way over to a group of younger looking cats closer to Split Rock. Swiftpaw only recognized one cat there, a fluffy flat face she-cat named Pinepaw whom she had met on a border patrol by Mountainclan territory a couple days before. The other apprentices were complete strangers, and with each of them sitting so close she couldn't tell what clan they individually belonged to.

"Let me introduce you to Nightpaw, Batpaw, and Leopardpaw of Treeclan. And Precious and Urchinpaw of Oceanclan," meowed Shadowpaw, gesturing towards each cat with his skinny black tail. Four of the cats had such dark pelts. Nightpaw and Batpaw shared long, pretty black fur. Though it seemed a patch on the one she-cat's back was lighter in color and her eyes were mix matched; one being an icy blue like the other molly's, and the second a forest green like Leopardpaw's. Swiftpaw guessed that molly must be Batpaw. She also figured the Treeclan apprentices must be littermates, or at the very least kin. The Oceanclan cats on the other hand were a bit of a different case. Urchinpaw's fur was black and dusted in sand; it was short and wiry, seeming to always be bristled and wet. Precious stood out the most out of all five if them; not only was her name out of place-most likely a kittypet name, Swiftpaw guessed- but her coat was a marbled cream and brown.

"I'm surprised Whitestar let a cat like you into Grassclan. They're so picky about how their cats look." Nightpaw took one look at Swiftpaw and snickered, looking to her siblings with mischief. Swiftpaw blinked in surprise, completely stunned by how the she-cat, someone she didn't even know, was talking to her. It was such a sudden, unwarranted remark too. Nightpaw must be the nastiest cat

Swiftpaw had met yet.

"What's wrong with how I look?" She growled, nubby tail wiggling violently.

"Well let's see. You don't have the right build for starters. You're too stocky, too pudgy, your tail is as small and fluffy as a rabbit's, your fur is way too easy to see through the grass, and you're too short. By Grassclan's standards, you must be one of the ugliest cats they've ever had the displeasure to call their own!" Nightpaw cackled, some of the other apprentices snickered along with her. Swiftpaw's pelt burned hot with embarrassment. A flash of anger sparked inside her, and the urge to box the disrespectful she-cat's ears caused her to involuntarily unsheathe her claws. Swiftpaw's muscles bunched, and just as she was about to strike a voice brought her to her senses.

"You can't fight at a Gathering, bear-brain!" It yowled. Rabbitpaw came rushing over to the group, pushing past the other apprentices, sliding in to wedge himself between the two she-cats. *Oh great, just what I need. Another cat here to laugh at me*,
Swiftpaw gave Rabbitpaw a challenging glare. Rabbitpaw's deep blue eyes bore into her in return, silently begging her to back down. The white and black molly huffed, sheathing her claws. After, she was shouldered away from Nightpaw by Rabbitpaw.

"Why'd you stop me?" She hissed, ears drawing back in agitation as they padded to another part of the clearing, followed by Shadowpaw.

"It's against the Warrior Code to fight at a Gathering. We're all supposed to be peaceful until the full moon wanes. If you wanna rip that tree licker's tail off tomorrow though, go right ahead. But you're on your own." For the first time, Swiftpaw could have sworn Rabbitpaw was looking out for her. After all this time, he was finally starting to warm up to the patched she-cat. Before she could say anything, a yowl sounded from Split Rock. Every cat in the clearing turned towards the four leaders. At the sound, another cat came rushing over to the Grassclan apprentices. It was Frostpaw, beaming giddily. She blinked a silent greeting to Swiftpaw and Shadowpaw before sitting beside her brother.

"Let the Gathering begin!" Exclaimed Blazestar.

"Wait, where is Littlestar?" Whitestar questioned, tilting her head. "We cannot start without him or Marshclan."

"We're here!" A cat caterwauled. From the undergrowth pelted a pretty flame point cat. After them, a party of muddy cats came spilling into the clearing, filling up the large space even more. The flame point cat ran across the clearing and through the crowd until they made it up to Split Rock. *They don't look like how Littlestar was described.*

The flame point cat settled upon the unoccupied space of Split Rock and let out a nervous *mrrow* of laugher. "Sorry we're late, everyone. Things are still kinda getting put back together in my clan." A murmur broke out among the crowd.

"Brightbounce?" Wavestar narrowed his eyes. "Where is Littlestar?"

"In Starclan," the she-cat replied nonchalantly, giving her chest fur a few licks. "He said it was his time to join them. He passed on with a smile on his face. Now I'm the leader. My new name's Brightstar!" The crowd's murmur broke out into a louder discussion, quickly silenced by the clearing of Wavestar's throat.

"I thought I scented Mashclan slime on the rocks of Star Path this morning," Fogstar muttered under his breath. Blazestar hissed at him to hush. Whitestar shot Fogstar a glare, her tail-tip twitching every so slightly.

"My condolences. The Land's Star will honor Littlestar for the many moons of service he has provided your clan. I believe we can allow you the honor of speaking first tonight," Whitestar meowed. Brightstar beamed.

"Thanks! I know I'm a pretty young cat, but I have sworn to take care of my clan to the best of my, or any leader's, abilities. To help me, I have named Morningrose as my deputy. With her apprentice now being a full warrior named Stemflower, she was left as the perfect candidate for the position." The clan cats cheered for Morningrose and Stemflower. Swiftpaw turned to see the two cats

in question sitting nearby the other clans' deputies. The older she-cat, Morningrose, held her head high while Stemflower shrank back beside her peers with bashfulness.
"Aside from that, prey is starting to run well once again. The water birds are returning, and the frogs are spawning. Oh, and speaking of spawning, one of our queens just had a litter! Littlebird has given birth to one healthy mollykit. And... I think that's all I have to say tonight!" Brightstar stepped back and purred, her blue eyes gleaming. Her mannerism was strange, she acted more like an excited apprentice than a leader like the other four cats. She seemed like a lot of fun though, if a bit unprofessional.

"Thank you, Brightstar. I trust now that you've gotten your mud onto firmer ground once, you won't try to come back onto Mountainclan territory since you should be satisfied. Unless you're tired of being a mud-paw," growled Fogstar, whiskers twitching in amusement of his insult.

"Hey!" Brightstar snapped, the fur along her spine began to rise. Fogstar didn't acknowledge the new leader's outcry. Whitestar stepped up once more to stand between the two cats. She fixed each of them with a warning glance before turning her attention to the crowd below.

"Grassclan is fairing well. We still mourn the loss of those taken from us by greencough this past Leafbare, but now the clan is thriving. We have four new apprentices joining us tonight: Frostpaw, Rabbitpaw, Swiftpaw, and our future medicine cat, Mistypaw. Prey is plentiful, and we have new kits in the nursery. However, there is also more distressful news I must tell this evening. To start: one of our elders, Poppycloud, has died in the past half moon. And our medicine cat Goldensong has fallen ill. We are unable to figure out why, and despite our other medicine cat's best efforts she will not heal. Which is why I must now ask if any medicine cat out there would be willing to take a look and see if they can figure out what is making Goldensong sick."

"Poor Poppycloud!" Cried a Marshclan elder.

"What's wrong with Goldensong? I hope she'll be alright," mewed a worried Treeclan queen.

"Grassclan could stand to lose a few more cats, those prissy pollen sniffers. Why should we give up our medicine cat to help their weak one?" grumbled the Oceanclan deputy, Sandybreeze. Chicorynose hissed at her threateningly.

"Why can't you rely on Snowfrost?" Questioned a Mountainclan warrior in the crowd.

Whitestar lifted her chin, looking down upon the crowd from the edge of her muzzle . Her expression was calm, but her eyes were cold and challenging, hushing the crowd with fear of her judgement.
"Snowfrost has done what she can, but I feel as though this matter might be better solved by an outside source," she explained.

"I would like to help!" Yowled a cat from across the clearing. Swiftpaw whipped around to see a fluffy mostly grey tortoiseshell she-cat sitting nearby a group of other cats who looked as if they spent all their time with herbs. Beside her was Snowfrost, giving her an angry glare, and Mistypaw looking at her with sparkling, hopeful eyes. Whitestar turned to the cat's leader.

"Fine. Hawkfern may help you. But she must be back at our camp by sundown tomorrow, whether or not she has healed your medicine cat," Fogstar meowed with a twitch of his whiskers. Whitestar dipped her head.

"You have the thanks of all of my clan."
Hope filled Swiftpaw from nose to nubby tail-tip. With luck, Hawkfern would be able to figure out what was wrong, and Goldensong would be better at last.

Chapter 12

[image]

Swiftpaw hobbled across Grassclan's camp, paws aching from the return journey. Fatigue overtook her, driving the young molly to her den for a good night's rest. But before she went inside she paused, looking over towards the small tree which housed the medicine cats. Snowfrost led the clan's visitor over, barely acknowledging Hawkfern. She
waved her tail as she disappeared into the hole of the tree, the ivy veil swaying shut behind her. Mistypaw pranced around beside the Mountainclan medicine cat, excitement radiating from her pelt. She invited Hawkfern inside politely, following her into the den. Satisfied, Swiftpaw ducked into her own den, practically falling down into her nest in a tired heap.

It was mid morning when she finally jolted awake. The young molly's fur stood on end as she whipped her head around to see some of her companions were still asleep in their nests. Though a glance towards the cracks in the rock pile revealed shining rays of sunlight spilling in, meaning it must be way past sunrise. Swiftpaw felt like she was forgetting something; the sensation nagging her like a frenzying fly buzzing around her head. It might have just been the habit of waking up for dawn patrol-or rather being woken up. Swiftpaw wasn't a fan of early mornings, but she grew accustomed to being woken to go out at first light to hunt and check borders. Though Chicorynose had put her on a different schedule now. On the way back from the Gathering last night she had told Swiftpaw that for a while they would be having battle practice at sunhigh, which meant she could sleep in. But Swiftpaw couldn't help feeling weird. Today, however, that feeling was caused by something else. The patched molly stood up in her nest, smoothing down her fur before leaving the den, heading straight for the lair of the medicine cats. As she neared the entrance, an unfamiliar smell drifted into her nose. She remembered what she had forgotten now; an outsider was staying in camp. The white and black patched she-cat slipped past the ivy tendrils to see Hawkfern

and Mistypaw sharing a hare in the center of the medicine den. Snowfrost was nowhere to be found.

"Hi Swiftpaw!" Trilled Mistypaw when she noticed her friend lingering in the threshold.

"Greetings. You're just in time for some breakfast," Hawkfern purred, motioning for Swiftpaw to come over with a double flick of her ear. Swiftpaw gladly took the invitation and settled herself beside Mistypaw, bowing her head to take a bite of the hare, thanking Starclan for the meal. The juicy, meaty taste dissolved any tiredness that still lingered in her joints, sore from travelling last night. Satisfied she purred, leaning against Mistypaw. Movement on the opposite side of the silver apprentice drew Swiftpaw's attention as she ate. A golden shape shifted around, darkened by the shade of the den. Hawkfern stood up, standing on tip-toe to stretch out her legs. Sluggishly she lumbered her way over to where Goldensong lay towards the back of the den. The pale golden she-cat began to stir as she caught whiff of the unfamiliar cat approaching her. A look of confusion was plastered on her face, her eyes still glassy and half-lidded like they had been since she first fell ill. But she did not make any effort to move. The only thing to indicate that she was even really alive was the steady rise and fall of her flank. Hawkfern sat by her nest-side, waving a paw in front of the other medicine cat's face. Goldensong barely seemed to register what was happening, blinking slowly, her gaze distant. Oddly, the fur along her spine began to rise anxiously. Hawkfern let out an interested "*hmm*", running a paw against the length of Goldensong's body. She called Mistypaw over to assist her. The fluffy silver cat stood up eagerly, padding to Hawkfern, leaving Swiftpaw alone in the center of the den. Lonely, she too went to stand beside the older medicine cat, curious to see what would happen. Mistypaw sat by Goldensong's flank now, her paws kneading against her soft belly comfortingly as the Mountainclan medicine cat continued her exam. She leaned down, placing an ear on her chest. A couple of heartbeats passed before she sat up again.

"Slow heartbeat. And her breathing is pretty shallow as well," she noted, with Mistypaw nodding along. The apprentice must have been keeping track of the list of symptoms Goldensong presented.

"She doesn't seem to be very focused either. Has she been moving or talking at all?"

"Only a little bit," Mistypaw confessed, giving her chest fur a few licks. "Her words are always slurred and panicked, and when she tries to get up she stumbles around and falls. The only place Snowfrost will let her go is the dirtplace, and even then I have to go with her. She has a hard time there..." Again, Hawkfern let out an interested hum, tail-tip twitching.

"Judging by all these symptoms...it would seem to me that Goldensong has been sedated," she concluded.

"What's that mean?" Swiftpaw asked, head tilted.

"It means she's been put into a state of relaxation that is now impairing her ability to properly function. But it isn't something that happens naturally. Someone must be giving her something to make her this way. Or she's been doing it to herself. Has she been through any trauma lately?"

"Well, her mother died," Swiftpaw answered. "But she's been acting like this since right before Poppycloud was discovered dead."

"Goldensong would never mess around with herbs recklessly!" Mistypaw objected, fur rising up defensively. She back away from Goldensong to stand in front of the older she-cat.
"She knows they're for her clanmates; strictly to be used for healing! She's a great medicine cat, how dare you accuse her of something so selfish!" Her tail lashed wildly, fluffed to twice its size. She showed great dedication to the sick medicine cat, acting as if she'd fight any who dare speak ill of her. Hawkfern blinked at the agitated apprentice slowly, waving her tail as if to signal for her to calm down. Swiftpaw watched as Mistypaw forced her fur to lay flat again before going back to kneading on Goldensong.

"I never accused your mentor of anything, I am simply gathering all the information I can so that I can make a proper diagnosis. I have known Goldensong much longer than you have, young one, I am perfectly aware of how dedicated she is to her duties." Hawkfern stood up, looking around the den.

"From the way you have described her behaving, I highly doubt she could do this to herself. Once, maybe. But she would not be able to keep doing so without at least snapping out of her stupor for a long enough while to perform a coordinated act such as feeding herself healing herbs. And if she did, you or another clanmate would have noticed by now."

"So if someone has been sedating her, and if it's done without her knowing, it would have to be with something she wouldn't notice," Mistypaw commented. "Otherwise she wouldn't take it."
Something she wouldn't notice? Swiftpaw echoed in her head. She pondered about what could cause something like that. But she wasn't a medicine cat. She didn't know anything about herbs and what functions they preformed. Except...

"Poppy seeds..." she mewed quietly. The medicine cats turned to face her.

"What was that?" Hawkfern asked, orange eyes glimmering with intrigue.

"Poppy seeds," Swiftpaw repeatedly herself, stammering slightly with unsurety, "t-they make cats sleepy and relaxed, don't they? And they're really small...so Goldensong may not notice them." The medicine cats exchanged a glance. Silence settled across the den as the two she-cats thought about the possibility.
"Plus, yesterday I overheard Snowfrost saying she was running low on them."

Mistypaw turned her head to look at Hawkfern.
"Cats are only supposed to take one or two," she pointed out, as if seeking the more knowledgeable cat's approval. "Any more than that could make a cat sick...."

"That could definitely be it," Hawkfern confirmed. Pride swelled in Swiftpaw's chest; she solved the mystery!
"But," she continued suddenly, "if that is the case, then that means someone has been feeding them to her for the past half moon."

"How could they do that?" Mistypaw asked, sounding worried.
Hawkfern shuffled through the Grassclan herb supply, searching for

poppy seeds.

"Most likely by putting them in her food. A similar case happened in Mountainclan many moons ago when I was still an apprentice. A cat was sedating another so that he could become the next deputy with the other candidate being out of commission. Of course, he was caught. Though a case like that would make no sense in this situation, seeing as how medicine cats are not much of a threat to anyone." As she spoke, the dilute tortoiseshell she-cat stumbled upon a piece of bark with an oak leaf covering it, and underneath it were poppy seeds. There weren't many left, maybe enough for another two or three cats. The discovery of the seeds did not divulge much, but it did tell the molly one thing: Swiftpaw was on to something.

"So now the question is: who's been poisoning the medicine cat?" The white and black patched molly wondered aloud, pinning her ears back against her head. She felt disappointed; she had really thought she'd cracked the case already. But they had only answered the what, not the who or why. It looked like more investigation needed to be done.

"That, unfortunately, is out of my jurisdiction. I am only a healer, not a Code Keeper or Spy warrior. You'll have to ask some of your clanmates to aid in that investigation. For now, let's focus on bringing Goldensong back to reality. Maybe once she is fully conscious she can shed some light on what's been going on with her. That is, once she comes out of withdrawal." With that said, Hawkfern abandoned the herbs, leaving them they way she had found them. All except for one: watermint. Swiftpaw remembered that herb from an outing with Mistypaw. The two apprentices had to go all the way to the river to find them. Swiftpaw had almost lost her balance and fallen into the water while trying to pull the herbs from the ground. That close call made forgetting about the plant difficult. Its stench made it pretty unforgettable as well; pungent and minty, with just the slightest hint of the riverbank. It was a powerful smell, maybe even strong enough to wake the dead if used in a massive bunch. Hawkfern gathered all that she could, bringing it over to Goldensong.

"Rabbit cat, can you get us some moss soaked in water?" She asked.

Swiftpaw wiggled her tail.

"Sure." She stood up and trotted towards the mouth of the den. "And my name's Swiftpaw," she said as she made her exist. She didn't stick around long enough to hear the Mountainclan medicine cat mumble an apology, she was too anxious to help out Goldensong already. They were so close to healing her, she wanted to get it done with already so that she could get back to her duties and Mistypaw could get back to enjoying being taught to be a clan medicine cat. The patched molly looked around camp, finding a wad of moss clinging to the side of the apprentice den. She padded over to it, carefully scraping it off with a sharp white claw. She picked up the spongy plant with her mouth, walking over to a puddle that was still formed in the clearing after the rainstom that had fallen two nights ago. Moss was a really soft material, she wondered why the clan didn't use it as bedding more than she had seen them use bracken. She could fully understand why they used wool, but bracken? Maybe it was harder to find good moss to line dozens of nests with. Swiftpaw shook her head, forcing herself to focus on the task at hand. As she arrived at the edge of the puddle she dropped the moss, giving it time to soak up as much as possible. When it was good and saturated she picked up again-delicately so as not to lose any liquid-and carried it back with her to the medicine den. When she walked through the hole in the tree she saw Hawkfern holding watermint up to Goldensong's snout. The golden she-cat looked more conscious now, her eye were clearer than they had been in the past half moon she had been ill.

"Oh good, there you are," Hawkfern trilled. "Hurry and bring that water over here."

Swiftpaw padded up to the dilute tortoiseshell cat, passing the moss to her. Hawkfern then turned, squeezing the water out all over Goldensong's head. Goldensong let out a startled gasp, jumping to her paws. Her fur stood on end as she shook her head, droplets of water landing on the other she-cats in the den. Goldensong panted, glancing around. Her eyes were round, confusion dictating her her expression.

"Wh..whats going on?!" She stuttered, eyes darting around.

"Goldensong!" Mistypaw trilled, practically jumping onto the other she-cat. A purr rumbled loudly in her throat as she nuzzled the pale golden molly's wet cheek. Doing so unbalanced her, sending Goldensong crashing down into her nest. Mistypaw hovered over her, sounding worried as she asked:

"Are you ok? How do you feel?"

"I feel dizzy," the older medicine cat mumbled, resting her head on her paws. She blinked a few times, trying to get her eyes to focus. "Did I oversleep?"

"You haven't been very conscious lately," Mistypaw confessed. "We think you've been taking poppy seeds."

"Poppy seeds?" Goldensong echoed, lifting her head. "Why would I do that?" Her voice sounding challenging.

"A theory we have come up with is that someone has been feeding them to you. Do you remember anything, chickadee?" Hawkfern asked as she came to stand closer to Mistypaw in the other medicine cat's view.

"Hawkfern...? No...no...I can't recall much of anything that's happened in the past...quarter moon? However long I've been like this."

"Half moon, actually," Swiftpaw corrected her. Goldensong furrowed her brow, clearly confused about the lapse in time.

"It will take her a while to be able to think properly, lets not overwhelm her," Hawkfern suggested. The dilute tortoiseshell lifted a paw to groom as she continued. "Depending on how long Goldensong has been given poppy seeds will determine how long it will take her to recover. She may go through some withdrawal symptoms due to the herb's properties. I advise you and whoever else may investigate this to wait until she has gotten them out of her system, and to keep a close eye on her so this doesn't continue." She put her paw down, leaning back on her legs to stretch. "I believe my work is done here now. Swiftpaw, if you would be kind enough to walk me to Whitestar's den to tell her I'm going, would

be great. I'm sure she'll want to send me off with an escort."

Swiftpaw nodded, waiting for the molly to say goodbye to the others. Hawkfern touched her nose to Goldensong's, her orange eyes staring into the other's green one softly.

"Feel better, chickadee. I look forward to seeing you at Half-Moon."

"May the winds be on your side," Goldensong purred.

Hawkfern blinked at her. "And may Starclan light your path." She turned, touching noses with Mistypaw before padding over to Swiftpaw. Together the two she-cats left the den, walking to Tall Stone to speak with Whitestar.
Goldensong is going to be fine now, Swiftpaw thought with a glance back at where they had just come from. *But why do I still feel like something's isn't right?*

Chapter 13

[image]

Night cast itself upon Grassclan camp. The clan retired to their dens earlier than usual this night, an odd excitement hanging in the air. Swiftpaw didn't know what was going on but was happy to play along, following her peers into the apprentice's den. As she settled herself into her nest, the white and black patched she-cat thought about the recent events that had unfolded in the past moon.
It had been a tough few days since Goldensong became conscious. An investigation was being held by Dewstone to figure out who had been sedating her. There were a few suspects so far, but with Goldensong barely able to recall what happened to her through her half-moon long comatose, not much progress was made. On top of that, the pale golden she-cat struggled with terrible withdrawal. Swiftpaw had barely seen her outside for the first six days; Mistypaw reported to her that Goldensong was having trouble sleeping and terrible bouts of anxiety. She was said to be sputtering nonsense about snow and an impending threat to The Land's Star. By the middle of the second quarter moon, Goldensong would come outside, but constantly dart off to the dirtplace. By the beginning of the third, Mistypaw happily told Swiftpaw that the older she-cat was beginning to get back to performing her duties. Finally by the time the moon was almost full again, Goldensong was back to full health. That evening the clan rejoiced, and Swiftpaw watched with satisfaction as Whitestar gave Mistypaw back to her original mentor. Swiftpaw sighed with contentment, a smile plastered on her face. She curled up in her nest, resting a paw over her muzzle and closed her eyes, allowing sleep to blanket her.
A short time passed when she was woken again. The patched molly looked up from the warm wool and bracken to see the glowing green eyes of Shadowpaw standing above her, his shape merely a hard to distinguish silhouette in the darkness. The black tom rested his tail on his friend's shoulder, guiding her outside. Swiftpaw let out a huge yawn as she followed tom's lead, eyes drooping. She stumbled along the way, feeling unusually tired. How long had she been sleeping anyways? As she emerged into the fresh air, a glance

at the sky revealed she had not been asleep long. Silverpelt still sparkled in the sky, the faintest traces of the sun barely making its presence known on the horizon. Why did she have to be up already? Swiftpaw looked around her, noticing the whole clan had been dragged out into the clearing. Whitestar emerged from her den in the side of Tall Stone, swiftly leaping up to its peak to gaze down at her cats, eyes tired but fur radiating with energy.

"Let all cats old enough to run across the meadow gather here beneath Tall Stone for a clan meeting," she called. The whole of Grassclan filed in closer to the stone, some muttering bitter, tired words among themselves.
"I know nobody is happy to be up so early, but you know we have a lot of work to do. I will be pairing off the apprentices to gather the flowers we need for today's celebration, then coordinating with our Den Keepers as usual to get camp decorated. Chicorynose will be organizing the hunting patrols over by the warrior's den. All of you know what to do now: disburse." The clan leader hopped down gracefully from Tall Stone, rounding up the apprentices as the rest of the clan headed over to Chicorynose.

"What's going on, Whitestar?" Swiftpaw asked, grooming her shoulder fur lazily.

"You six have a very important task ahead of you. I am sure you are all aware, but I will remind you just in case. Today is Bloom's Day. This is a very sacred holiday for us, and I would like everything to turn out perfect. Your task is to go out and gather as many flowers as you possibly can in as many colors as you can. No flower is too small. I want you each to stick close to your partner, but spread out away from the other pairs to cover more ground," Whitestar explained, turning her gaze onto each apprentice.
"Quailpaw, you will go with Frostpaw. Rabbitpaw, you are with Heatherpaw. And Shadowpaw, you will travel with Swiftpaw. If you have any questions, ask Chicorynose before you leave." After making her decision the siamese she-cat bounded off to a group of cats who lay waiting for her by the nursery. Swiftpaw looked at Shadowpaw who playfully batted at her ear, hopping away in the direction of the brambles. Swiftpaw laughed, trotting after him. The two apprentices crawled through the bramble tunnel out of camp,

ran down the hill, and padded out into the open meadow.
When they were a decent distance away from camp, Shadowpaw stopped to sit down and groom himself. Dawn light was making it's way onto the landscape with every passing heartbeat, bathing the plush green meadow in an orange warmth. The sun warmed the apprentice's pelts compelling them to take a moment to groom and bask.

"The sunrise is beautiful," Swiftpaw purred in awe, licking her chest fur. She took some time to wash her pelt before turning her gaze to the meadow. Flowers buds lay just about everywhere, their petals beginning to open as dawn touched them. Collecting flowers would be an easy task, they could probably be done before sunhigh.
"Should we start collecting now?" she questioned Shadowpaw. The black tom paused grooming his belly fur to look up at her.

"Nah," he mewed. "we've got time before the flowers are completely in bloom. Besides, I don't want to get them from here." Swiftpaw stood up, blinking at the tom curiously.

"Ok then. Where *do* you wanna go?"

Shadowpaw grinned at her, a mischievous glint in his eyes. "I was thinking we should take a trip down to Twolegplace."
Swiftpaw gasped, wiggling her tail.

"Are you crazy?" She hissed. "Why in the name of Starclan would you want to go there?"
Shadowpaw rose to his paws, bumping his head against hers.

"Relax, bunny. Twolegplace is filled with rare flowers we can't find in the meadow. I thought it'd be a good idea to get some." He began to pad away, dragging his tail under Swiftpaw's chin as he passed her.
"Besides, I wanna see what I missed out on when you offered to take me to your Twolegs." There was sarcasm in the black tom's tone as he looked over his shoulder back at his friend with a smirk.
Swiftpaw felt heat rise in her pelt as she gazed into his grass green eyes.
"Did you think I forgot?"

"No..." She mumbled. "But I was told that I could never go back to Twolegplace if I wanted to be a warrior."

"Then why'd you offer?" he teased. Swiftpaw swiped at his muzzle playfully.

"That was before the offer to join Grassclan. And well...Maybe I wanted to have a big fuzzball like you around to play with." The patched molly trotted passed Shadowpaw, chin held high.

"Oh what, suddenly you changed you mind?" he purred, following after her.

"I mean...It couldn't hurt to visit," Swiftpaw confessed. "Whitestar doesn't have to know."

"It'll be our secret," Shadowpaw swore, keeping pace with her. After a long journey across the meadow, past the clearing where they had first met, Swiftpaw and Shadowpaw arrived at Twolegplace. Nostalgia swelled in Swiftpaw's heart, the memories of her past life as a kittypet coming back to her as quick as lightning. By now she was leading, taking Shadowpaw farther than the tom had probably expected to go. The patched molly knew exactly where she was headed; back to the neighborhood where she spent most of her kithood. Familiar scents and sounds flooded her senses as the apprentices took their first pawsteps onto the familiar dirt path. It hand't been that long ago since she'd walked this very path as a proud and ignorant kittypet, living each day in comfort and luxury. But that seemed like seasons ago now. Swiftpaw found it far more rewarding living as a future warrior than as a house cat.

"I know all the best gardens around here," she assured Shadowpaw, taking him to the nearest fence. The white and black patched she-cat didn't hesitate to jump onto and over the white wooden posts, landing gracefully in the yard on the other side. Surrounding her were gorgeous flowers of unique breeds and colors, fully bloomed and ripe for the picking. She called out to Shadowpaw who jumped over the fence to join her in the flowerbed, gazing around in astonishment. Swiftpaw simply smiled at him as she bent down to carefully nip the stems of a few flowers she found to be particularly beautiful. *Cornflower, iris, daffodil, primrose, carnation, gladiolus*, she

listed the names of the flowers off in her head. She remembered Gem teaching her about them; her housefolk liked to garden, and was particularly fond of flowers. Swiftpaw was pretty familiar with plants now thanks to her and Mistypaw, it turns out the knowledge came in handy.
With her jaws clamped around her choice of blossoms, Swiftpaw led Shadowpaw into the next garden. The two apprentices went around the neighborhood like this, picking flowers until their jaws were so full they couldn't carry anymore. As they were about to leave the last yard, a shriek caught their attention.

"Who are you? What are you doing in my garden?" A cat behind them hissed. Swiftpaw and Shadowpaw turned to see a fluffy white and ginger patched she-cat standing before them. The molly stood on tip toe, back arched and fur bristling with fear. She looked twice as big as either of them assumed she really was. Her odd, backwards curled ears were pinned back against her head, her eyes as round as the full moon. Swiftpaw carefully dropped her flower bundle at her paws, licking her lips before expressing the joy she felt as she locked eyes with the kittypet.

"Gem!" She chirped, a purr rumbling in her throat.

"Hana..?" Gem mewed softly, ears perking.

"It's Swift- well, Swift*paw* now actually." The patched molly stepped forward to touch her nose against the other molly's affectionately as the odd fluffy kittypet calmed down.

"I never thought I'd see you again," Gem admitted, purring and licking Swiftpaw's ear.

"I told you I'd come visit," Swiftpaw responded. "Oh! Let me introduce you to my friend. Shadowpaw, this is Gem. Gem, Shadowpaw!" She stepped closer to the tom in question, presenting him with a tilt of her head. Gem chuckled nervously, giving her ruffled chest fur a few licks. She acted quiet standoffish in the sleek black tom's presence.

"Nice to meet you. What interestiiing... names you both have, " she commented, glancing away. Swiftpaw simply giggled at her. She

figured deep down, Gem must be terrified of them. But once they got caught up she was sure that she'd come around and relax.

"Hey I think I've got some time to kill, wanna help me round up the rest of our group for a reunion?" Swiftpaw asked Gem hopefully. Gem looked at her with interested orange eyes. She nodded, padding past the two younger cats to jump onto the fence. She encouraged them to follow with a flick of her tail, just as she jumped down onto the dirt path on the other side. Swiftpaw and Shadowpaw padded after her after Swiftpaw picked her flowers back up. Before they went on to visit more gardens and cats, however, the Grassclan apprentices tucked their collection under a bush for safe keeping. Once that was taken care of, they were off on their adventure.

"Let's grab Max first," Swiftpaw suggested, picking up speed. "Race you to his den!" She yowled before bursting into a sprint. She ran down the dirt path, looking behind her to see her friends running after her.

"Wait up you crazy furball!" Shadowpaw yowled. But Swiftpaw wasn't listening, she wanted to be ahead not just to win, but to also plan a surprise. She turned the corner of the path and skidded to a halt, slipping into a bush that sat right there by a fence. She waited patiently until she saw the shape of Shadowpaw lingering just on the other side.

"Swiftpaw?" He called, looking around. Swiftpaw chuckled to herself quietly, crouching down. She watched him for another heartbeat, wiggling her haunches before springing out. She leapt onto him, sending the young tom jumping away in surprise. His short fur stood on end, and his eyes narrowed threateningly. Swiftpaw fell over laughing, rolling in the dirt unable to contain herself.

"Rabbit-dung!" Shadowpaw cursed, letting out a low growl as he relaxed. "Starclan, Swiftpaw, you scared the dirt out of me!" He lashed his tail roughly, stirring up a cloud of dust on the earth below him.

"I'm sorry, I couldn't resist. But the look on your face is priceless,"

she snickered, standing up. Shadowpaw shook out his pelt, glaring at her coldly. Swiftpaw simply bumped her head on his shoulder, smiling at him innocently. He sighed, curling his tail.

"So where's this 'Max' live?"

"Right here," Gem wheezed as she caught up, out of breath. She gestured towards a den which sat on the corner of the dirt path. "Let me go in and get him," she offered, crawling through a hole in the fence. The Grassclan apprentices waited on the other side, watching her approach the den. She walked through a weird solid veil, disappearing inside. A few heartbeats passed before she emerged again, with a huge spotted tom following behind her. They were bickering-what about Swiftpaw did not know-as usual. Shadowpaw's fur bristled the closer Gem and Max approached. His claws unsheathed out of instinct and he backed up a bit warily.

"What's wrong?" Swiftpaw asked, looking at him. The scent of his fear wafted to her nostrils.

"Thats no cat," He hissed in response. "that's a Cheetaclan warrior!"

"'Cheetaclan'? Shadowpaw, I have no idea what you're talking about. Max is just a really large cat, but he's friendly" she chided. Shadowpaw seemed unconvinced. The kittypets made it through the fence at last, Max rushing past the other to get to Swiftpaw. He pressed his large nose to hers gently, his purr loud as thunder in his broad chest.

"Swiftpaw, it's great to see you again! How've you been? How's being a wildcat working out?" He spewed questions like an excited kit.

"Being in Grassclan is amazing, Max. I have no regrets about my decision to leave the neighborhood. By the way, meet my scardy-cat friend, Shadowpaw." She nodded her head towards her clanmate.

"Good to meet ya." Shadowpaw merely grunted in response, bringing himself forward, blocking Swiftpaw with his tail as if protectively. Max simply chuckled, clearly taking no offense to the black tom's wariness. "You two are awfully thin. Aren't you eating

enough?"

"Well there's not exactly a never ending supply of food out in the meadow like there is in a Twoleg's den," Swiftpaw explained. "But we do usually have our fill, we're well fed by clan cat standards."

Gem twitched her nose in distaste. "You're still too thin!" she insisted. Shadowpaw rolled his eyes while Swiftpaw shook her head slowly.

"You may think that, but trust me we eat plenty."

"Alright alright, enough about food before you make me hungry. What should we do now?" Shadowpaw interupped, flicking an ear. Swiftpaw grinned, looking from him to her kittypet friends.

"Now we gotta get Flower and Oliver!" She decided.

"You mean Oliver," Gem corrected her, lifting a paw to groom in between her front toes. "Flower has a new housefolk who took her to live a few neighborhoods away."

"Oh..." Disappointment abruptly washed over Swiftpaw like an unexpected wave. Flower was the cat she'd looked forward to seeing most; she knew that she would have wanted to hear all about her adventures so far. She only hoped that Flower was happy in her new home, wherever that was, and that she'd find her again soon. "Well...what are we standing around here for? Let's go get Oliver then."

The group of kittypets and clan cats walked together back down the dirt path, talking as they went. The fur along Swiftpaw's spine began to rise the closer they grew to Oliver's den, her voice dying down until she could no longer bring herself to hold a conversation. Anxiety gripped at her heart, and thoughts raced through her mind. Maybe coming here was a bad idea, what if her old housefolk saw her? Would It take her away if It did? Would she be able to escape, or would It lock her away forever? She hid behind Max as they pressed forward, hoping that his large body would be able to hide her well when they reached Oliver's yard. Shadowpaw touched his tail to her shoulder, signing "what's wrong?" in the Silent Language. *He must smell my fear*. Swiftpaw shook her head in reply, not

wanting to speak out about her worries just yet.
The four cats slipped through a tall and thick white fence with rectangular posts up to the door of the den. Max stepped forward, scratching on the door to get Oliver's attention while Gem went to sit on the windowsill to peer inside. Oliver took notice of his friends, meowing on the other side of the door until his housefolk let him out. When he stepped paw into the yard, he gasped.

"Swift?"

"Swift*paw*," she corrected him, stepping up to touch her nose to his. "Great to see you, Oliver. I heard about Flower. You must be so lonely."
Oliver nodded, letting out a soft sigh.

"I hope she's ok," he mewed. "She would have loved to see you."

"I know, I'd love to see her too. But she wouldn't want us to be sad just because she's not here right now. Why don't we all go do something fun?"

The other cats nodded along with her in agreement. They abandoned Oliver's yard to go explore elsewhere. For a while they got themselves into mischief, tussling around and chatting amongst themselves happily as they drifted between dens and yard. Time seemed to fly so quickly. The sun hung almost at full height in the sky now. Shadowpaw realized how late they were running and reminded Swiftpaw of their day's obligation, convincing her to finally say goodbye so they could get their flowers and go home. With a heavy heart, Swiftpaw agreed. She really missed her kittypet friends. But she knew where her true home was now. Grassclan was where she was meant to be. The two Grassclan apprentices meowed their goodbyes to the kittypets, collecting their flowers again. They heard faint mews of farewell behind them as they padded away, out of Twolegplace, and back to the meadow where they belonged.

Chapter 14

[image]

It was just after sunhigh when the apprentices made it back to camp, with jaws full of fresh flowers and legs slightly sore from their adventure. When they crawled through the bramble tunnel a stunning sight greeted them. The camp was swathed in a rainbow of colors; the clearing laden with the scent of flowers. Dens were neatly decorated with an assortment of flowers and twigs; the honeysuckle bush which made up the nursery was alive with fragrant white and yellow blooms.
There weren't many cats in camp just yet, but those who were sat near the medicine den. Swiftpaw thought that to be odd, why would cats need to visit the medicine cats on a holiday? Was this also a day for checkups?

"You're back!" A cat purred cheerily, padding up to them. Before the apprentices now stood Chicorynose, her fluffy fawn chest and tail were decorated in small blue flowers, and her head crowned with a chicory and pink coneflower wreath.
"I see you two made out like a couple of foxes in a rabbit hole, well done. Go ahead and relax, it's going to be a while before the feast begins. Why don't you join me over by the nursery once you've dropped those off?" She meowed. Swiftpaw blinked at her as if to say she would be there. Chicorynose seemed to understand, briefly ducking her head to the apprentices before turning tail and bounding over to the nursery. Swiftpaw and Shadowpaw headed in the opposite direction, into the tree which housed the medicine cats. Swiftpaw padded in first, pushing past the ivy tendrils as she crossed the den's threshold. Inside were piles of flowers everywhere. The young apprentice placed her bundle down on top of the nearest one, licking her lips. When she turned her head to leave she saw Cricketsong sitting between Goldensong and Snowfrost. The medicine cats were delicately weaving flowers into her fur while Mistypaw passed them on. When she noticed Swiftpaw she paused, leaving a bunch of flowers by Snowfrost's side unattended for a few heartbeats to go speak to her friend.

"Those flowers look lovely!" Mistypaw complimented. "Everyone's going to love those colors."

Swiftpaw smiled, "It was Shadowpaw's idea to get them." Shadowpaw chuckled, nudging her shoulder.

"Wouldn't have known where to look without your help, so you're the one who should be thanked."

"Oh don't be so modest, without your brilliant idea we probably would have brought back a boring posy of daises and dandelions instead."

"And that makes me worthy of all the praise? I'm not being modest, I'm sharing the spotlight. What's wrong with daises and dandelions anyways?"

"Other than the fact that they're everywhere?"

Mistypaw giggled. "You two bicker with each other like two elderly mates." She gave each warrior apprentice a nudge towards the den's exit.
"I don't mean to sound rude when I say this, but I need you two to leave now. We have a lot of cats to decorate today, and we can't have you distracting us and taking up space. You're going to have to wait your turn outside."
Shadowpaw let out a fake scoff, turning up his nose with a cheeky grin on his face. Swiftpaw swatted at his muzzle playfully, chasing him out of the den. She leapt at him, bowling the sleek black tom over. The apprentices tumbled and tussled around on the ground for a while, laughing and squealing like kits. Swiftpaw came to a halt on her side, reaching up to softly tug on the edge of Shadowpaw's ear. Shadowpaw pushed her face away playfully, rising to his paws to pelt towards the nursery. Swiftpaw darted after him, jumping on top of him again as they came to stop by the honeysuckle bush. She sat on him, resting a paw against his head.

"Get off me you nubby tailed furball!" Shadowpaw laughed. Swiftpaw held her head up triumphantly.

"No way, if I do then you'll get away. A great hunter never lets her

prey slip out from under her," she gloated.

"Get the enemy warrior!" Cried a tiny voice. Swiftpaw blinked as she felt something thump against her side unexpectedly. She looked to her flank, finding a tiny brown scrap sitting next to her, its white paws pressed against her. The little kit extended her claws, scaling up the larger apprentice like a tree. The kit perched herself on Swiftpaw's shoulder, pulling on her ear. The white and black she-cat jumped off of Shadowpaw, yowling as if she were being injured.

"Oh no, an ambush!" She cried, flopping onto her side dramatically. The small brown kit stood on top of her, looking quite proud. She looked over at her sisters who now sat by Shadowpaw's side, sniffing at him.

"We saved you from the Treeclan warrior, Shadowslayer!" Piped a white and lilac she-kit, grinning ear to ear. Shadowpaw pat her head with a paw.

"Well done Lilac Thorn, Sparrow Strike, and Striped Savage," he purred. "Which one of you took down that thuggish rabbit-heart?"

"I did!" Squeaked the brown kit, jumping off of Swiftpaw to skip her way over to Shadowpaw. She held her head high, a smile spreading across her white muzzle.

"Ah, Brown Star, I should have guessed. You saved my life. Thanks to you brave warriors, me and the rest of Grassclan are safe now."

"Who wants to play a game?" Swiftpaw heard the voice of her mentor mew behind her. She sat up to see the Grassclan deputy's paws become a playground for the quartet of kits.

"Me me me!" The chanted, weaving around the fawn colored molly's legs, pawing at her. Chicorynose let out a soft giggle, herding the kits together with her tail so that they now stood in front of her. Shadowpaw came to stand beside them, inviting Swiftpaw to do the same.

"How about we play Prey-Sight, No-Sight?" Chicorynose proposed. The kits bounced in place excitedly.

"Then that's what we'll play! You all wait here. When I say 'no sight,' you start stalking towards me. And when I say 'prey sight', you have to freeze. If you move when I can 'see', you're out. First one to catch me wins the game. Got it?"

"Got it!" Chimed the kits, causing Swiftpaw to purr. Their adorableness was almost overwhelming. They were definitely going to be trouble when they got older, as if they weren't enough trouble already at only a moon and a half. Chicorynose gave a brief nod, padding a bear length away. She turned around and took a seat, wrapping her plumed tail neatly around her paws. Swiftpaw readied herself to play, prepared to allow one of the kits to beat her if possible.

"Ready? No sight!" The deputy mewed, shutting her eyes. At once, the kits and apprentices dropped into hunting crouches, the kits looking on towards the older cats and taking note of their form. They stalked forward, creeping closer to Chicorynose with hushed giggles.
"Prey sight!" she suddenly exclaimed, opening her eyes. The kits and apprentices froze instantly in place. The white and lilac kit wobbled a bit, the stance she held unstable. After a moment of trying to keep her balance she ultimately collapsed, letting out a disappointed mew. She trudge away, seating herself down in the shade by the queens.
"No sight!" The game picked back up and the hunt was on.
After a few more heartbeats of stalking and freezing, only Swiftpaw and the brown kit were left in the game. The two glanced at each other with determined smirks. Bright blue eyes met kitten blue, a desire to win twinkling in each molly's eye. But there could only be one winner.
"No sight!" Chicorynose called. The race was on, the brown kit was already in the lead, slinking forward as fast as her tiny legs would allow. Swiftpaw crept forward slowly, as if she were hunting a mouse. Before she could leap, a squeak caught her off guard. The brown kit jumped as high as she could, knocking herself into Chicorynose. The fawn molly toppled over from the unexpected hit, blinking open her meadow green eyes to look at the kit who stood on top of her.

"I did it! I caught the prey!" the brown kit boasted proudly, walking down Chicorynose's flank to get at her tail. "Now let's take it back to the fresh kill pile for the feast!" She pulled on the deputy's tail, her sisters leaving the queens' side to help. Chicorynose laughed, flicking the brown kit off. The kit fell beside her littermates, batting at the plumed tail which swayed back and forth in front of them teasingly. One of the kits, a brown tabby with a white patch on the bridge of her nose, decided to jump on top of Chicorynose to grip the base of her tail between her tiny front paws.

"I got her!" She mewled, "One of you grab her tail, then I'll go grab her scruff!"
The brown kit leapt onto the fawn she-cat's tail-tip, holding it down beneath her. She took the tail in her mouth, pulling on it with all her strength. The tabby kit pranced up to Chicorynose's neck, tugging on her scruff with her needle like teeth. Another kit, a tiny a brown and white tabby, replaced her sister by the base of Chicorynose's tail. The last kit ran to sit by the older she-cat's face, pushing on her muzzle. Chicorynose let out a *mrrow* of laughter, wiggling her body along the earth in the direction the kits were pulling here.

"Help, they're kitnapping me!" She cried out happily.

"We're taking you to the fresh-kill pile," the white and lilac kit corrected her. "And prey doesn't talk!"
Chicorynose rolled her eyes playfully, whispering "sorry" under her breath.

"I've never seen you act so silly, Chicorynose," Swiftpaw commented with humor in her tone. Chicorynose turned her eyes forward to look at her.

"Just because I'm the deputy doesn't mean I can't have fun," she remarked, standing up. The kits came tumbling off of her, gathering beneath the shadow of her form. Chicorynose poked the brown tabby kit playfully in the side.

"You're it, kit," she squealed, running away. The kit's sisters followed suit, scattering in different directions. The tabby kit growled playfully, pelting after the Grassclan deputy.

Swiftpaw and Shadowpaw laughed, watching them scramble around.

"Hey you two!" Called the familiar voice of Frostpaw from over by Tall Stone. The grey tabby and white she-cat came bounding over with her brother at her side.
"I just talked to Mistypaw. She wants to see you in her den."

"Finally," Shadowpaw breathed, walking across camp, Swiftpaw not too far behind.

"We'll catch up with you after you're done!" Frostpaw called after them as they ducked into the den. Inside the medicine den, the medicine cats sat waiting.

"Ah, there you are. Let's have Shadowpaw come up first," Snowfrost decided, with Goldensong beckoning him over with her tail. Shadowpaw came to sit between them, ears lowered slightly. Was he nervous about getting flowers put in his fur? Mistypaw grabbed a few blossoms from the piles which sat around the den, bringing them over to her mentor.

"Are these good?" She asked. Goldensong nodded.

"Perfect," she praised, bending down to pick some up. She passed on some of the flowers to Snowfrost who helped put them on Shadowpaw. The medicine cats blocked Swiftpaw's view, leaving his decor a mystery to be revealed. When they finally parted to give the tom space, Swiftpaw saw the work they had done. Together, the medicine cats had woven Shadowpaw a necklace of black eyed susans and violets.

"For you we have laid woven flowers which represent: justice, motivation, encouragement, loyalty, and devotion. Wear them with pride, young apprentice, for these are your defining traits," meowed Snowfrost, nudging him away.
"You, you're next."

Swiftpaw gulped, padding past Shadowpaw who in turn took her place on the other side of the den. The white and black patched she-cat sat between the medicine cats, watching them anxiously as they

spoke to Mistypaw in the Silent Language. She hadn't known flowers had special meanings, now she was afraid they would choose a collection which might refer to her with unflattering things. Foreign, weird, ugly, sad, pathetic. For all Swiftpaw knew they could say anything about her in flowers and she'd have to deal with it. She watched with interest as Mistypaw nosed through the flower piles, searching for the perfect blooms to decorate her with. She soon pulled out some small yellow flowers that Swiftpaw wasn't familiar with. She placed them beside Snowfrost before diving back into the piles. The next bundle of flowers she grabbed were large, painted a soft pink, Swiftpaw recognized them from Max's garden. The last of the medicine cat's picks was a stem of tiny white flowers, which Swiftpaw immediately recognized. *Heather!* With flowers chosen, the medicine cats got to work. They used their teeth and claws to carefully tie stems together around Swiftpaw's neck, leaving her plenty of room. It wasn't like a flower collar would bother her much if it were tied any tighter anyways, it hadn't been too long since she wore a collar after all. But the medicine cats were careful, taking their time to make sure every flower was perfect. When they were done, Mistypaw stood in front of her to put on the final touch. She took the stem of heather, tucking it behind Swiftpaw's ear.

"The yellow flower is celandine and the pink is gladiolus. The heather is for protection," Mistypaw whispered only loud enough for Swiftpaw to hear before pulling away.

"For you we have laid woven flowers which represent: joys to come and strength of character. Wear them with pride, young apprentice, for these are your defining traits," meowed Goldensong. "You're free to go and relax a little while longer, I'm sure sundown isn't too far off, and then the feast can begin."
Swiftpaw's stomach growled loudly at the mention of a feast. She had been so busy today that she hadn't had time to eat anything since the night before. But if a feast was going to be held, she knew every bit of fresh-kill on the pile right now would be for that occasion. She would just have to wait a little while longer until the last of the hunting parties returned. She bowed her head respectfully to the medicine cats before padding past them, back to Shadowpaw. Shadowpaw stared at her with wide green eyes, his

expression unreadable. But a purr rumbled in his throat and his mouth hung slightly ajar.

"Uh..you look great," he mumbled with a soft smile.

"So do you," Swiftpaw purred back. The two apprentices walked side by side out of the medicine den. Swiftpaw blinked a few times to adjust her eyes to the harsh rays of the Newleaf sunset as they pushed past the ivy veil. Sunlight sparkled on their pelts reflecting off their fur beautifully, and setting the colors of their flowers aflame.

"Let's lay by the apprentice's den," Shadowpaw suggested. Swiftpaw had no objections, happily following her friend to lay and bask in the fading light. As they plopped down beside each other next to the pile of rocks which they called a den, Swiftpaw couldn't help but review the day in her mind. She'd spent it all with Shadowpaw, and had a wonderful time. She never realized just how fun it was to be around him, since usually they were so busy with training. Sure she liked being around him before, but now she had a new appreciation for the lanky black tom.

"Y'know..." Shadowpaw began softly, pulling Swiftpaw from her thoughts.
"I keep thinking about the gathering last moon."

"Huh? Why?" Swiftpaw asked, tilting her head. What an out of the blue thing to think about. "That feels like ages ago."

"I know, but....Well, Nightpaw said some really messed up things to you. And I didn't try to stop her. If I had said something, or hadn't taken you to meet her in the first place, you wouldn't have to have been subjected to that."

"It's not your fault," she replied, leaning against him. "Plus I'm a big kitty, I can't fight my own battles. If Rabbitpaw hadn't stepped in I would have shred her into crowfood."
Shadowpaw chuckled, turning his head to groom her cheek fur.

"Yeah, I know you would have. You're a tough little bunny after all, I bet you could take on a full grown badger and win."

"A badger? Really? Well if I'd win I'd probably come out just as ugly as Nightpaw says I am now. At least then her remarks would be warranted"

"But you're not," he objected. Shadowpaw's voice remained soft, but his tone deepened to one far more serious. "Don't listen to what she said. Nightpaw is a mouse-brain. You're not the ugliest cat in Grassclan. You're not even ugly. Even if no one else sees it, or thinks so...I think you're beautiful." His voice grew even softer as he made his statement, the last sentence coming out as nothing more than a whisper. Swiftpaw felt heat rise in her pelt and her heart felt as if it were fluttering. She had to knead her claws into the earth, fearing that it may carry her off the ground and into Silverpelt above. Before she could say anything in return to Shadowpaw, Frostpaw came charging over to them, jumping in between them. Around her neck hang a collar of dandelions and buttercups, and behind her ear sit an orange and yellow coreopsis.

"Guess what? Goldensong said my traits are childishness, humility, happiness and faithfulness. And the flower on my ear means 'always cheerful'! Isn't that neat?" She beamed, turning her head to look at each flustered apprentice with wonder in her eyes. "...Did I interrupt something?"

"No," they both blurted out, glancing away from each other. Their attention became drawn up to Tall Stone by a yowl a heartbeat later, much to their combined relief. Whitestar stood on the ancient boulder's peak, pelt and head decorated in blue and white flowers.

"Today is a day of great celebration; where we thank Starclan for the promise of flowers they have made the sun swear to each passing year, to grant our clan the opportunity to grow. Like flowers, each of us has a meaning, individuality, and a purpose. Each day we are growing and blossoming into the cats Starclan wants us to be. To honor this day, we shall feast upon the prey which feasts upon the flowers that promise us new life, and new beginnings. Come now, share prey, share tongues, and give thanks to Starclan. The promise of flowers has been fulfilled."

With her speech over, the hungry cats of Grassclan took the offer Whitestar made and ran with it. Groups of cats grabbed at all that

pile had to offer: rabbits, hares, pheasants, mice, and even a plump groundhog, brought over to the elders. Swiftpaw and Shadowpaw grabbed a quail to split between the two of them. Frostpaw picked out two shrews and took them to share with Quailpaw over by the nursery, leaving her friends to be alone once again. Relieved, Swiftpaw and Shadowpaw returned to their spot by the apprentice's den to enjoyed their meal, talking and laughing, regaling moments of their time in Twolegplace together. Later that evening, after celebration was over, the two of them retired to the den where they moved their nests together, sleeping beside each other soundly through the night.

Chapter 15

[image]

The full moon shone in the sky, bathing camp in its soft silver light. Silverpelt sparkled overhead, every star twinkling brightly. It was time for the gathering once again, and after the previous day's Blooms Day celebration, the clan was relaxed and ready to go. The gathering party spilled out from the bramble barrier, walking single file. The apprentices who were attending tonight, Swiftpaw, Quailpaw, and Frostpaw, were marching in better formation than they had before. Swiftpaw padded behind Dewstone who looked back at her every now and then as they walked and talked.

"How's the investigation for Goldensong going?" Swiftpaw asked the white and silver patched Code Keeper in a hushed voice.

"It isn't really going anywhere anymore. It's been a whole moon since that happened. And since Goldensong can't remember anything useful other than Snowfrost feeding her, I have nothing to work with. I still have my suspects: Ambereye and Waspwing, but not much has come up with them."

"How'd you narrow those two down?" Swiftpaw queried, eyeing the cats in question suspiciously. The two ginger cats walked ahead of her with three or four cats between them.

"Well they're the ones Snowfrost told me brought her prey most often. And it makes sense in a way, in the case of motive. Maybe Waspwing's jealous of his sister. Or Ambereye could have wanted to seek revenge on Goldensong because of the kit that went missing."

Swiftpaw's ears perked. "What kit?"

"It was from the litter Jaybird and Ambereye had almost seven moons ago. One day the kit was there, then a few days after, it was gone. Vanished without a trace, despite how hard Ambereye and Goldensong searched."

"Seven moons ago..? Then that would make it Mistypaw's littermate, wouldn't it? Her and Frostpaw never mentioned having a missing sibling."

"It's probably because they don't know. Which wouldn't surprise me, Jaybird was pretty distraught over it. She wouldn't want her other three kits to question her about the fourth."
Swiftpaw nodded as she took the information in. She could understand why it was never mentioned. But Ambereye didn't seem like the type to seek revenge. From the little she'd interacted with her-on patrols, and in the nursery-she seemed nice. Yes, Ambereye was a bit odd, her jokes could use some work and she could learn to be a little more serious, but there wasn't anything sinister about her. Waspwing was another case. Swiftpaw didn't know too much about him. He was a Guard warrior, so most of the time he was in camp or on patrol. She supposed that could make him a more likely culprit, but that wouldn't explain why he'd possibly be jealous of Goldensong. Was he upset that she was more well liked? That her rank was respected more than his was? Whatever the case, neither Dewstone nor Swiftpaw could place a paw on the reason.
"How are Frostpaw, Mistypaw, and Rabbitpaw by the way? Anything going on with them?"

Swiftpaw blinked, coming out of her thoughts. "Oh, no not really. Frostpaw and Rabbitpaw are doing well with their training, from what I've seen. And Mistypaw is doing much better with Goldensong teaching her, but it does seem like Snowfrost's a bit upset about it."
Dewstone simply let out a knowledgeable "*hmm*", falling silent. Swiftpaw waited for her to say something on the matter, but she never spoke up. *Guess she can't really get much out of that*, she figured as they came to stand in front of the shrubbery wall. Grassclan cats went spilling into the Gathering clearing one by one, standing grouped together until Whitestar gave them the ok to mingle. At her word, the group disbursed. Swiftpaw stood in her place for a few extra heartbeats, glancing around, wondering what direction to wander off in first.

"Hey Swiftpaw, wanna race and see who can make it to Split Rock first?" Frostpaw challenged as she came to stand beside the white

and black patched she-cat. Swiftpaw turned, giving her friend a smirk.

"You're on!"
Just as soon as she accepted, Frostpaw had taken off, leaving Swiftpaw behind in the dust.
"Hey no fair!" She mewled, darting after her. She ran at top speed, dodging cats at almost every tail-length until she caught up. The two mollies held each other's gaze for a moment before Swiftpaw pulled ahead. She stuck her tongue out at Frostpaw as she ran past, lowering herself closer to the ground to become more streamline. She could see herself drawing nearer to Split Rock, victory almost in her grasp. She looked over her shoulder to see just how far behind Frostpaw might be, but in doing so she forgot to watch where she was going. Her body suddenly collided with something just as she whipped her head around. The young molly went rolling, coming to a stop a tail length away from her original position. Swiftpaw let out a sneeze as dust got up her nose and sat up to smooth her now fluffed fur down. She didn't hurt herself, thank Starclan, but she was a bit ruffled up. As she groomed herself, she glanced over to see what she'd hit, realizing she had crashed into another cat. Panic surged through her, *hare-dung, what have I done??* The cat sat up with a groan, rubbing a white paw against their head. Their silver and white fur was fluffed up in surprise as they turned their green gaze onto Swiftpaw. A overwhelming feeling of guilt overcame her.

"Oh my Starclan, I'm so sorry!" They mewed frantically, jumping to their paws. The cat rushed over to Swiftpaw, checking her over, sniffing at her.
"Are you alright? Are you hurt? I'm such a mouse-brain, I wasn't paying attention to where I was walking, I'm so so sorry."

Swiftpaw shook her head, standing up. "It's ok, I'm ok. It wasn't your fault. I should have been the one watching where I was running. I was so busy trying to see if I was beating my friend in a race that I wasn't looking out for any cat that may be walking up ahead. What about you, are you ok? How's your head?"

The cat sighed with relief. "Oh good, I thought you might be injured. I think I'll be alright though, my head's a bit sore but I'll get some herbs from Mothsong when I get back to camp. My name is

Moonpaw by the way, I'm from Treeclan."

"I'm Swiftpaw, from Grassclan. Sorry for running into you. What a terrible way to meet huh?"

Moonpaw shook her head. "Not at all, it'll make for a great story to laugh about later on. Besides, there could always be some cosmic reason for why we've met this way."

"Huh, maybe. So you said you're from Treeclan? Do you know Smokepaw and Magpiepaw?" Swiftpaw recalled two of the apprentices she had met on her first dawn patrol, the image of the littermates still clear in her mind as if she'd met them yesterday.

"Well I should hope so, they are my littermates after all. They're not here tonight, but I can tell them you said hi," Moonpaw replied, twitching her nose in amusement. Swiftpaw gasped. She stared at the fluffy molly for a moment to take in her features. Her facial structure and pelt type certainly matched the littermates, and her eyes were the same pale meadow green as theirs too. But her body structure was a bit off, if anything it matched more closely to a cat like Frostpaw. But other than that the resemblance was uncanny. Speaking of uncanny resemblances, about a foxlength away, Swiftpaw spotted a cat who looked almost exactly like Moonpaw. His fur was a bit duller, more of a grey color, and his chest had less white than hers, but the resemblance was eerily strong.

"Hey, who's that?" She asked, nodding at the cat. Moonpaw turned to see who she was referring to before whipping back around to address her.

"Oh, that's Wolfheart! Come on, come meet him," she insisted, taking Swiftpaw over to the tom. Moonpaw stood in front of the fluffy warrior, beaming.
"Hi papa-I mean-Wolfheart." She giggled. "Meet my new friend, her name is Swiftpaw."
Wolfheart turned her green gaze down onto Swiftpaw, making her feel quite small. He was a large cat, even taller than a fully grown Grassclan warrior, she's guess.

"Hello my little one. And hello to you, Swiftpaw. It's a pleasure to

meet you, I heard your name announced at last moon's gathering. How's your training going?"

"I think I'm doing pretty good. Chicorynose says I'm a natrual born hunter."

"Ah, so Chicorynose is your mentor?" He queried. Swiftpaw gave a firm nod.
"That's good, I'm sure she'll make a fine warrior out of you yet. Now, I think you two should run along now, there isn't much time until the gathering begins, and I'm sure you want to catch up with more of your friends. It was nice meeting you, Swiftpaw, take care." Wolfheart dipped his head to the white and black patched apprentice, turning to lick Moonpaw between the ears before padding off back into the crowd.

"Do you want to come with me over to Split Rock?" Swiftpaw asked. "I bet Frostpaw's over there looking for me, she probably thinks I ditched her."

"Oh sure," Moonpaw agreed, walking along with her over to the ancient cracked boulder. Standing nearby where the medicine cats and queens were sitting was Frostpaw, bouncing back and forth to spend time with both Jaybird and Mistypaw. When she caught sight of Swiftpaw, she abandoned them both for a few heartbeats to tackled her. She leaped gracefully, landing on top of Swiftpaw light as a feather, obviously not trying to hurt her but sitting on her to interrogate her and her whereabouts.

"Swiftpaw, where have you been? I've been looking all over for you. And who's she?" She yowled, glancing over at Moonpaw.

"That's Moonpaw, I accidentally crashed into her during our race, and kinda got sidetracked. At least you got to spend time with you mom and sister."

"Yeah, well I was still worried about you. There's a lot of cats out here, it's easy to get lost or cornered by an overly curious enemy." Swiftpaw simply mumbled another apology, glancing away. Her gaze was taken elsewhere as an odd feeling settled upon her, like they were being watched. Over by the medicine cats Swiftpaw

spotted Snowfrost watching Frostpaw and Moonpaw-who were now talking-with interest. She rose from where she was sitting, gracefully slinking over to the two she-cats.

"Greetings," she purred, turning her ice blue eyes onto Moonpaw. "Who might you be, little one?"

"Oh hello, my name Moonpaw, I come from Treeclan." She smiled sweetly.

"Moonpaw~" Snowfrost echoed, her purr growing louder. "How lovely. I bet you are a well behaved apprentice, aren't you? Are you listening to your mentor? Do you pay attention to your lessons?"

Moonpaw nodded, "I work really really hard! Leafheart's the best mentor, I'm learning so much from her. I'm already thinking about becoming a Hunter or Den Keeper when I become a warrior."

"Oh how nice! I'm sure you will be a warrior who'll make Treeclan proud."

"Moonpaw!" A disembodied voice called out of nowhere. The three apprentices and Snowfrost turned to look at where it came from, spotting Wolfheart in the distance. He motioned for Moonpaw to come to him, shooting Snowfrost a glare. Snowfrost trotted back over to the other medicine cats, settling back down in the spot she was previously seated in.

"I have to go, I'll see you later," Moonpaw mewed, padding off to join her father, leaving Swiftpaw and Frostpaw alone just as the leaders yowled to announce the beginning of the gathering. The two apprentices brought themselves to settle beside Mistypaw, the three she-cats sitting close to warm each other from the crisp air of the night.

"Let the Gathering begin," yowled Wavestar, stepping up on his section of Split Rock. Tonight it seemed that it was decided that he would be making announcements first.
"The winds have picked back up along the shoreline; mid-Newleaf storms approach. My clan and I are taking shelter in our newly built Forest Patch camp as a precaution. We have lost too many cats in

past Newleafs to rough waves and high tides, and I have decided that this new temporary camp will help prevent casualties. By Greenleaf we should be back at our usual camp under the Twoleg Settlement Bridge," he began. Blazestar let out a small scoff, and the grey and white tabby tom gave him a harsh glare.
"In other news, my clan welcomes three new apprentices to our ranks: Whisperpaw, Currentpaw, and Stonepaw."
The crowd of clan cats cheered the apprentices names. Swiftpaw turned to see three small cats sitting in a patch of moonlight, two with heads held high while the third shrunk back in shyness. Wavestar stepped back, signaling he had finished speaking for the evening. Blazestar was the next to step up.

"You know it's funny how you mentioned moving into the Forest Patch, and yet you forgot mention that you and your clan have been trying to take Rubble Path from Treeclan while staying there." He snickered, but not with amusement. It was more of a forced, sarcastic snicker with anger burning in Blazestar's sunset orange eyes.
"And yet, you keep failing. How many skirmishes have there been in the past moon? About five or six?"

Wavestar growled, "Until the storms pass and the winds die down, my clan is stuck in the Forest Patch, but your old leader Ravenstar the Wise did not think to give us more space for emergencies such as these. Of course we are trying to take Rubble Path, it's high ground, and serves well for hunting."

"Yes but that land rightfully belongs to Treeclan. You territory begins where the sand line lingers, not at the edge of the rocks by the top of the hill. Your cats merely want to use the rocks to bask upon anyhow, not to hunt like Treeclan frequently does," Blazestar snarled. Tensions were rising, the blazing tom turned his fiery gaze from Wavestar over to Whitestar. "And another thing. It seems that more than one clan has been trying to push at our borders lately. Very recently I have had patrols coming back from the Grassclan border telling me they've found scents of Grassclan cats past the scent markers, and have found remains of a few mice."
Whitestar stepped forward on her part of Split Rock, clearly confused.

"From what I know, none of our apprentices have stepped paw passed the border. And my warriors know better than to hunt beyond the meadow," she assured calmly, trying to put Blazestar at ease. But the ginger and white tom was unconvinced.

"There has been several reports of trespassing from your cats, Whitestar, too many for it to be an accident. One of your warriors has been stealing mice from Treeclan, and I advise you to investigate the situation and correct it before I'm forced to remind you where the border lies," Blazestar warned, thrashing his tail. "The same goes for you as well, Wavestar. Keep your claws out of our forest and off of Rubble Path before I reclaim the land Ravenstar the Wise so graciously granted you while you still lived under Pebblestar the Malevolent's rule."
Wavestar lowered his ears at the mention of the leader Pebblestar. Swiftpaw recalled hearing about her; Pebblestar was the leader before Wavestar, and his littermate. She was said to be an abusive, battle hungry leader who'd take any opportunity to fight, even if it meant making up lies to ruffle other clan leaders' fur. Or even forcing her own cats to battle one another for her own amusement. It was bold of Blazestar to mention her, and it probably struck a nerve within Wavestar. The grey and white tabby's feathery tail wagged violently, fur bristling along his spine. He flexed his claws, looking as if he were trying to contain himself.

"Heyyy, I don't mean to interrupt, but how's about we finish tonight's announcements so you guys can get back to fighting each other once it's over?" Brightstar butted in with her suggestion nervously, flashing a wary smile. The agitated leaders looked at her then back at each other, conflict stricken in their gaze. A heartbeat of silence settled upon the them before anyone finally spoke.

"Fine."

The gathering ended shortly after. Swiftpaw scanned the dissipating crowd for the familiar pelt of Moonpaw. She wanted to say goodbye to her new friend before Whitestar called. For a heartbeat she thought she caught sight of her standing behind an old elm tree, but noticed that the cat's pelt was far too dull to be the young she-cat's. Instead, it was Wolfheart. A cat Swiftpaw hadn't expected to even be acquaintances with the warrior was standing with him. It was

Snowfrost, looking quite displeased. Her tail thrashed with agitation and she paced back and forth between the elm and some bushes. Swiftpaw was too far away to hear what they were saying to each other, but she could tell by their body language that neither was pleased. They kept glancing in the direction of her and Frostpaw then back in another direction-maybe where Moonpaw was? Swiftpaw grew awfully curious, what could they be fighting about?

"Grassclan, regroup!" Whitestar called by the shrubbery wall. Swiftpaw watched Snowfrost hiss at Wolfheart one more time before skulking over to where the rest of the Grassclan gathering party stood waiting. The white and black patched apprentice gave one last glance over towards Wolfheart before turning tail, following her clanmates home.

Chapter 16

[image]

Clouds gathered in the sky overheard. Wavestar had been right, Newleaf storms were approaching. But nonetheless until the rains began, Grassclan remained busy as ever. Swiftpaw, Frostpaw, and Rabbitpaw would have their first assessment today. Each apprentice was accompanied by a cat who was assigned to evaluate them, and no cat more. It was for better judgement, a mentor may grade their apprentice more leniently, or even lie about them passing just to make themselves look good. But a cat who was not as familiar with the apprentice would be more honest with grading.

The three apprentices traveled out of camp together up until midway into the eastern part of the meadow. Rabbitpaw and his evaluator, Tigerfang, had broken away from the group to head towards Rabbit Gorge-a popular spot for rabbits to spawn, and a great place to hunt-to check the Mountainclan border. Frostpaw and Chicorynose headed down to check the southernmost border by Twolegplace and the unclaimed territory. Unsurprisingly, Swiftpaw was headed to the Forest Patch, with Whitestar accompanying her as her evaluator. It was where Swiftpaw had first began her training after all, it was only right that she be tested for the first time there. Whitestar had chosen to personally assess her to see how she was adapting to clan life on top of learning to be a warrior. This only served to make Swiftpaw anxious. She had to force the fur along her spine to relax, and she prayed to Starclan that Whitestar didn't catch her fearscent. If she had, the regal siamese she-cat didn't take note of it out loud. In fact she remained completely silent until they reached the Treeclan border, deep in the Forest Patch. They stood in silence for another few heartbeats, listening to birdsong and the swaying of oak branches in the breeze.

"Now Swiftpaw," Whitestar began, turning her pale blue gaze onto the nervous apprentice. "Check the border. Tell me what you scent."

Swiftpaw stepped forward and breathed in deep, parting her jaws to

taste the air. She shut her eyes, allowing all the smells to linger in her nose and scent glands.

"A patrol came by here recently. They left scent markers on that tree over there," she mewed, pointing at a thick oak to her left with a front white paw.

"How long ago? Can you tell who was on the patrol?"

Swiftpaw took another sniff.

"It was probably just after sunrise. The scent is bit stale now because of the evaporating dew, but it's still there. I think I smell...three cats? A young tom, an older tom, and a recently pregnant queen," She evaluated. Whitestar twitched her nose, giving a slight nod.

"Now that you've checked the border, what do you do?" She asked.

"Huh? Oh!" Swiftpaw trotted up to a tree, leaving a fresh scent mark on the rich brown bark. She wiggled her tail in satisfaction, looking to Whitestar for approval. The Grassclan leader stood beside her, nodding, a look of pleasure on her face.

"Now I'd like you to demonstrate the crouches for the following prey: rabbit, mouse, and one of your choice."

Swiftpaw nodded, dropping into a crouch. She kept her pawsteps light as she crept forward, careful not to let them crunch on the fresh leaf litter, crisp from the gradually warming climate. She held her body above the ground, holding her breath a little to suck in her gut. She paused for a moment-mid stride-before darting off, leaping onto the back of an imaginary rabbit. She relaxed, straightening herself out before returning to her place to perform another crouch. She dropped down low, sliding her paws against the earth lightly so as not to send any vibrations through the ground with her movement. All of her weight went onto her haunches. As quick as a viper she struck out, pouncing once again, returning to her spot swiftly after. Finally, she began her final crouch, one she had known long before joining the clans. Swiftpaw tip-toed across the forest floor, staring ahead. She took a heartbeat

to pause before taking off into a sprint, propelling herself into the air with limbs outstretched like she was catching a bird in mid flight. She landed gracefully back on all four paws, trotting over to Whitestar with head held high. The Grassclan leader seemed impressed, giving Swiftpaw a nod of acknowledgement.

"Finally, I'd like you to go off on your own and catch as much prey as you possibly can. I will come get you when I think you've hunted long enough, for now I will be watching you from the shadows."

Swiftpaw gave her a nod and bounded off, not even waiting for Whitestar to hide herself in the undergrowth. Her nerves had gotten so bad that the order to go hunt seemed more like a blessing. It was peaceful hunting by herself in the forest. It certainly helped her relax, even while she concentrated on tracking down a sparrow she had just scented. The little bird hopped along the leaf litter, picking at the seeds from some fallen oak tree flowers. Its feathers were fluffed from a chilling wind that began to stir through the woods. Luckily it carried Swiftpaw's scent upwind-not that it mattered much at the moment since birds could hardly smell anything-saving her the trouble of having to hide her scent. She dropped to a crouch, sneaking up behind the sparrow quietly. She hadn't been watching her pawsteps carefully enough as her paw accidentally kicked at a twig, drawing the bird's attention onto her. It took off, with Swiftpaw pelting after it. *Rabbit-dung*, she cursed in her head, leaping up to snatch it. She scraped at the little bird's flight feathers, sending it hurtling to the ground. Once it fell it began to hop away with Swiftpaw in hot pursuit. Before it could part it's beak to sound an alarm call the white and black she-cat was on it, severing its spine with a snap of her teeth. She promptly buried it, wasting no time in going back on the prowl.

Swiftpaw went on like this for a while. She kept having near misses with prey, only to catch it in the end anyways. She had grown used to hunting with a partner, which she supposed was a good thing, but it made her mediocre at best when left to hunt alone. *Whitestar must think I'm a klutz*, Swiftpaw wiggled her tail in shame. She was sure she had failed this part of the assessment, she should have never taken Chicorynose's favoritism of hunting for granted. *I'll just have to work harder*. The scent of a rabbit drifted into Swiftpaw's

nose, making her involuntarily salivate. She hadn't caught a rabbit on her own yet, and she knew if she could it could better her chances at passing her test. She followed the fluffy creature's scent trail to a tiny clearing of clovers. There the plump brown bunny sat munching away, ears turning towards every foreign sound. It seemed nervous, had it already heard her coming? No, if it had it would be standing, or at least rising on its back legs to get a better view of the area. Though it was unusually fat, perhaps it was a doe who'd recently had a litter. Swiftpaw hoped so, if she caught and killed it while it was still pregnant she could ultimately destroy a fresh food supply that could feed the clan in the near future. But if the doe had already had her kits, she would be slower and easier to catch, weighed down by her own milk. Swiftpaw licked her lips and dropped into a crouch, silently creeping across the forest floor. She prayed to Starclan to grant her luck. When she was sure the rabbit was not paying attention she sprang forward, swiping at it's hide with claws extended. She gripped the rabbit with a paw, trying to pull it closer to deliver the killing blow. But the rabbit kicked out at her face, missing her eyes by a whisker. It let out a heart wrenching shriek before slipping out of the young molly's grasp, hopping away while Swiftpaw was still dazed. That shriek would surely send the rest of the prey into hiding for the remainder of the day; that rabbit had to be her last catch. Swiftpaw darted after it, clawing at the earth to pick up speed. The two of them skidded across the forest floor, twisting and turning past trees and bushes as they went. A scent met Swiftpaw's nostrils as she pursued the furry creature. They were drawing awfully close to the border. If she couldn't snag the rabbit before it crossed, it was game over. With one large determined leap, Swiftpaw landed on the rabbit's back, digging her claws into it to hold it down. She dropped her weight on it and gripped the back of its neck, holding it until she heard a satisfying crunch between her jaws. The rabbit's body went limp beneath her. As Swiftpaw stood up straight, panting with jaws parted, a foul odor came to greet her. She coughed, jumping off the rabbit. What in the name of Starclan was that stench? She sniffed at her prey to make sure it wasn't contaminated. Only the sweet smell of fresh meat came from the carcass. Swiftpaw parted her jaws to taste the air again-as nasty as that may be-and followed the scent trail. Two bear lengths past where she left her catch, the nubby tailed apprentice peered through the bushes and came across a startling

sight. A cat lay on the ground, a crow standing on its back. It let out a caw before propelling its beak towards cat, ready to tear a chunk out if its flesh. Swiftpaw sprang out of the undergrowth, shooing the bird away while simultaneously being met with the horrible stench from before, tenfold. She recognized it now, especially being so close to the cat. It was the smell of death. Swiftpaw took a few paces back, retching onto the leaf litter beside her. She crouched down and panted heavily, eyes watering so badly she could hardly see.

"Whitestar," she croaked, voice scratchy from getting sick. "Whitestar, help!" she yowled again, turning her muzzle skywards. At her call, the Grassclan leader came running, freezing a foxlength away as she too caught whiff of the dead body. She cautiously approached, bringing herself to stand beside the bewildered apprentice. She helped her stand, allowing Swiftpaw to lean against her as she caught her breath.

"Who is that?" She whispered hoarsely. Whitestar gave a small shake of her head, slowly creeping forward towards the carcass. Her fur bristled and tail-tip twitched with interest as she drew closer, looking down at the face of the cat.

"It's Waspwing..." she announced, voice low with sadness. Goldensong's brother. The tom must have gone to hunt on his own after the dawn patrol. He was a Hunting warrior, on top of a Guard. How could he have died if he was so capable of not only defending himself, but the camp as well? What could have taken him down...or who?

"How could this have happened?" Whitestar breathed, eyes staring down at the ginger tom's body, unfocused.

"What should we do?" Swiftpaw wondered aloud, not daring to get any closer to Waspwing than she already was.

"We have to take him back to camp," the wise leader responded. "Snowfrost and Goldensong need to examine him."

"Even though he's-"

"We need to know how he died," Whitestar interrupted. "And he needs to be given a vigil." In a flash she bent down, grabbing the tom's scruff. She motioned for Swiftpaw to help, and as much as she'd rather keep her distance, she reluctantly followed her leader's command. The white and black patched molly padded over, getting a grip on Waspwing's back left leg-careful not to puncture his skin with her teeth-and assisted Whitestar in carrying him home, all of her prey forgotten.

The journey felt like it took an entire season; by the time the bramble barrier came within their sights Swiftpaw was sure her nose had fallen off. She could no longer smell Waspwing's death stench, her senses had become numb to it. But no one else could ignore the pungent odor as she and Whitestar came into Grassclan's clearing. All those who were in camp turned or emerged from their dens to stare. The two she-cats dragged the dead warrior's body all the way to the medicine den, ignoring the questions and outcries of their clanmates as they went. When they passed the ivy veil, a shriek met their ears.

"Oh my Starclan!" Mistypaw exclaimed, scrambling backwards in surprise.

"No..." gasped Goldensong as her brother was laid down in front of her. Whitestar blinked at her, silently passing on her condolences. Tears welled in the pale golden medicine cat's eyes. But she shook her head, stepping forward to look over and nudge at Waspwing's body. Though it was evident that grief gripped her heart, Goldensong knew she had a job to do. She'd want justice just as much as any cat would if foul play was involved, and she would be sure to examine every flea-length of her brother's body to see if any physical harm had come to him in his final moments.

"When you're done, I'd like you to speak with Dewstone about what you find," Whitestar instructed, swishing her tail.

"Yes, Whitestar," Goldensong mewed, dipping her head. Her eyes flickered up for a heartbeat to acknowledge her leader before she looked back down, continuing her exam. Whitestar twitched her whiskers, turning tail to leave. Goldensong called out, beckoning Mistypaw over to her to assist.

"Part of being a medicine cat is handling things like death. As much as it may hurt, and as foul as it may be to smell, we must look past our mortality to get the job done. We're professionals, we grieve in silence, but only when our task is complete," she appraised the fluffy silver apprentice. Mistypaw gave a curt nod, settling herself on the opposite side of Waspwing.

"Let all cats old enough to run across the meadow, gather here beneath the Tall Stone for a clan meeting."

Swiftpaw heard Whitestar yowl, drawing her out of the den and towards Tall Stone. Around her cats began to gather, clearly shaken by the sight of Waspwing. The queens huddled together by the edge of the honeysuckle bush, with Cricketsong begging her kits to stay inside. The elders crawled out of their boulder stiffly, with Smokesnout muttering bitter words with Tornface about the stench while Meadowcall hung her head low. Warriors edged towards Tall Stone, whispering among themselves and throwing around theories of what was happening. Among them, Ladybugbite stood out the most. She was seated beside Dewstone, pressed into her, mumbling something incoherent into her ear. Swiftpaw came to sit by the boulder's base, tilting her head back to peer up at the siamese she-cat above.

"Cats of Grassclan, as many of you are now very well aware, Waspwing is dead. Swiftpaw discovered him laying on the border of Treeclan territory, and from what I can conclude...Treeclan may have something to do with it."

A murmur came from the crowd below.

"Is there any evidence besides him being on the border?" asked Ladybugbite.

"As of this moment, no. But I have good reason to believe that they were involved."

"And what's that?" questioned Beetlepatch, a Guard warrior who sat at the back of the crowd. His ginger and white body shook slightly.

"Those of you who were at the Gathering heard the accusations

Blazestar made. He believes some of us have been crossing the border to hunt. How are we sure that none of his cats have taken justice into their own paws?" Whitestar eyes scanned the crowd, her expression calm and her words smooth as she spoke.

"Waspwing was fine this morning," Ambereye noted. "So maybe something *did* happen!" Her fur began to bristle upon announcing her own assumptions.

"You shouldn't go lookin fo' trouble where there ain't any," Boulderfall countered, thrashing his tail.

"We can't have unnecessary battles," Jaybird agreed from just outside the nursery.

"There are young kits to worry about after all," responded Ashwhisker, looking at his denmates, specifically towards the very pregnant Rosebloom. "And more on the way."

"I will not do anything irrational, or rush into battle over a hunch. We will wait for Goldensong to examine Waspwing's body, and for Dewstone to conduct an investigation before doing anything further. We will act when solid evidence presents itself."

"Whitestar?" Goldensong called, emerging from her den. The clan collectively turned to look at her. Some held their breath, eager to hear what she may have discovered.

"Tell us, what did you find?" Dewstone urged.

"Well, there aren't any wounds on him," Goldensong announced, sitting in front of her den with her tail neatly wrapped around her paws. "But it's evident that he wasn't well. His gums and nose are pale, and it doesn't look like he groomed himself today. Waspwing prided himself on his appearance. Something must have been wrong."

"Y'know now that I think about it, I'm pretty sure I overheard him complaining of a bellyache this morning," meowed Butterflytail, another Guard warrior. "But he still went on the dawn patrol. He seemed fine, he even ran off to hunt!"

Whitestar gained a thoughtful look, twitching her ears with interest. The clan talked amongst themselves for a few heartbeats before she spoke again.

"There is a lot of information to take in. Yet not enough to draw any proper conclusions. The best course of action to take right now is to follow through with a more thorough investigation. Dewstone will look into every possibility, so the cause of Waspwing's untimely death may be discovered," she assured, giving her chest fur a few licks. "Before I conclude this meeting, there is one more matter we must address. The reassignment of Waspwing's apprentice, Heatherpaw. Though her training is nearly complete, I would still like her to be taught by a capable, experienced warrior. Butterflytail, I would like you to take over as Heatherpaw's mentor."
The handsome tom in question stepped out of the crowd, followed by Heatherpaw who looked rather shaken up. The two touched noses in front of everyone before disappearing back into the throng of Grassclan cats again. Whitestar looked on in approval before concluding.
"Now that that's taken care of, I would like to speak my senior warriors in my den. Everyone else may go about their normal routines. You are all dismissed." Whitestar leapt down gracefully from Tall Stone to stand in front of Goldensong and Dewstone while the rest of Grassclan parted ways. She turned to look upon Swiftpaw, beckoning her over with a swish of her plumed tail. Hesitantly Swiftpaw approached, settling herself beside her leader.

"Are you sure unkempt fur and a pale nose are all you found to be wrong?" Whitestar verbally prodded Goldensong, voice barely above a whisper. Her pale eyes searched the medicine cat's green ones, begging for a better answer. Goldensong shook her head slightly.

"Mistypaw noticed something red dripping from the corner of his mouth. From the smell, I beleive it may be juice from a berry."

"Berry juice?" Swiftpaw parroted. Why would Goldensong keep that information from the clan? Was it more significant than Swiftpaw was lead to believe?

"Were there any berry bushes where you found Waspwing?"

Dewstone asked the young apprentice, voice hushed.

Swiftpaw blinked, staring at her superiors. "I...I didn't have time to notice. The smell, it made me sick. I wasn't paying attention to anything around me," she confessed, ears lowering with shame. She should have done more instead of sitting there and cowering.

Whitestar lifted a paw to groom. "You will have to go take a look then, Dewstone," she directed between licks. "And I would like you to take Swiftpaw with you to assist. She will serve to be useful, I'm sure."

Dewstone nodded, resting her eyes on the white and black patched apprentice. Swiftpaw gulped nervously, unsure of how she would be able to help. *But I'll do what I can,* she promised silently, raising her chin to appear more confident. At once, the four she-cats began to separate. After getting sick earlier, Swiftpaw's belly felt uncomfortably empty. All she wanted to do now was grab something to eat and go rest on a soft patch of grass. But before she could, she was stopped again by Whitestar. She wiggled her tail in annoyance, her belly growling like thunder in protest of the leader's interruption.

"Yes, Whitestar?" She sighed

"Would you gather the prey we left behind when you reach the Forest Patch again, please?"

"Oh, right, of course." Swiftpaw ducked her head; she'd almost forgotten about her prized rabbit, along with the other prey she had buried just before it. Whitestar curled her tail in approval, turning to return to her den.

"By the way," she mewed, looking over her shoulder. "You did well today. We'll make a fine warrior out of you yet."

Swiftpaw's ears pricked and heart swelled with pride. At least one good thing had come from the day. Now she could only hope to have such luck during the investigation.

Chapter 17

[image]

A chilly breeze ruffled the she-cats' pelts as they made their way back to the Forest Patch. Dewstone and Swiftpaw, accompanied by Ladybugbite, arrived once again to the cover of oaks, back to the spot where Waspwing's body had been found. Swiftpaw's rabbit was still there at least, Ladybugbite helped her bury it before they went on with the investigation.

"Where was the body laying, Swiftpaw?" Dewstone asked, nose twitching to follow the remains of Waspwing's death scent. Swiftpaw sniffed at the ground, following the foul traces back to the border, back to the spot where Waspwing had laid. A caw caught her attention, making her jump. The young apprentice tilted her head back to see the crow from earlier still lingering in the tangle of branches above, watching with interest. *I stole its dinner*, she reminded herself, *I won't let any mangy old crow snack on our warriors. Cats deserve better than that*. She hissed up at the large black bird, only to have to it screech back in response. It sounded like it was laughing at her as it began to flap it's wings and take off, disappearing deeper into the woods. Swiftpaw flicked her nicked ear, turning towards Dewstone.

"He was right here." She motioned to the precise spot with a black paw. Dewstone padded over.

"Right on the rim of the border, interesting. Alright, now that we know where to start, we need to begin our search. Ladybugbite, search closer to the meadow, I'll head towards the river along the border, and Swiftpaw you head in the opposite direction. We need to look for berry bushes, specifically ones with red fruit. If you find one, run back to this spot and call for the rest of us. Same thing if you discover any other clues: fur, blood, unusual claw marks, and so on. Got it?"
Ladybugbite and Swiftpaw briefly held each other's gaze, nodding in unison. Wordlessly, the three of them split up; Swiftpaw turning

tail to head southwards along the border. She gave herself two bearlengths of space to search from the scent markers, figuring if she spread out she'd have a better chance at finding the bush. If they could even find a bush with berries on it at this time of year. Weren't most red berry bushes Leafbare bloomers? That's what Swiftpaw remembered Gem telling her once. She sighed, turning her blue eyes towards the sky. Clouds still covered most of it. By the change in light Swiftpaw guessed it would be dark soon. She'd have to hurry, if they didn't find anything before evening cast they probably would never find anything at all. *Then Waspwing's death will be left a mystery*. Noise grabbed for Swiftpaw's attention not too far off from where she currently walked. Her ears twitched as she strained to focus on it. Crunching leaves, mews, and giggling filled the air. Who could that be way out here? Certainly not a Grassclan cat. Intrigued, Swiftpaw crept forward, keeping her body low to the ground to avoid detection. To her right about a foxlength away, something started to rattle through the bushes. The white and black patched molly's ears pricked as she whipped around to stare in that direction now. Out of the undergrowth popped Snowfrost, bounding along as if she were in a hurry. A strange array of emotions shown themselves on her pretty silver tabby-masked face, in a such a way that it was hard to determine what she might truly be feeling. Swiftpaw pressed herself lower to the forest floor, observing her behavior, undiscovered. Snowfrost seemed to be in a rush, with fur fluffed and an eagerness radiating from her pelt. For a brief moment she looked behind her-in the direction Swiftpaw could still hear the noise coming from-and made a face. Was that a smirk or a scowl? She paced forward another few whisker-lengths until she came to a halt in front of a bush. From underneath it she pulled a packet of leaves and flowers, herbs for her stock most likely. With herbs obtained, the lynx point molly dashed away. Swiftpaw sat up to watch her scurry off, standing on her hind legs for a heartbeat to watch until Snowfrost was completely out of sight. *That was weird*, she thought, bringing herself back down into a crouch. She turned herself back into the direction of the noise and continued to press forward until she reached the border once again. Nearby she spotted the pelts of a few cats tussling around on the ground. It was strange seeing Treeclan cats so comfortable on the forest floor. Whenever she'd seen them, patrols would be anxious to get their claws back into the bark of the oaks. So then why was a group of

Treeclan warriors playing on the ground? Swiftpaw skulked along the border until she was in the direct path of the cats who lingered just across the scent markers. She hid herself underneath a dense bush to observe the odd behaving cats. From this angle she could see them better. They were small-far too small to be warriors at least-playing around in an open clearing. One cat lay with legs tucked under them, while another two chased each other around. The fourth simply cheered, circled around the two, spouting words of encouragement. It took her a moment, but shortly Swiftpaw recognized the cat as Moonpaw, the apprentice she'd met at the last Gathering. The two cats rolling around, she realized, were Smokepaw and Magpiepaw. She figured they must have snuck away from their camp to relish in a little leisure time. Blazestar was probably working them to the bone, preparing them in case a battle with Oceanclan or Grassclan ensued. *At least they don't have to worry about us.* Swiftpaw gave her chest fur a few licks while she reflected on Whitestar's assurance of peace. She was a rational leader, she'd be able to talk her way out of a fight if tensions became too high. Swiftpaw wondered how Blazestar felt, believing a Grassclan cat had been trespassing. It was bad enough that Oceanclan was trying to steal their territory, it must be a lot of pressure to think that another border neighbor might be doing the same. *It's nice that cats can find time to slip away and enjoy themselves though*, *even with all the problems they face*, was the rumination that went through her mind next. Swiftpaw watched the apprentices play a while more, silently picking sides and rooting cats on. The fourth cat-an unusual black and white apprentice Swiftpaw did not recognize-joined the fun, leaping onto Moonpaw's back. Moonpaw squealed like a kit, turning to tug on the cat's ear. Yearning pulled at Swiftpaw's heart. She wished she could go over there and play with her friends. Why were the clan separate, anyways? Couldn't they all come together in harmony for more than just one night each moon? Wouldn't survival be easier if they all worked together, rather than struggle and fight against one another? These were questions that had nagged her since she was first introduced to the clans and their boundaries. But Swiftpaw had to respect their way of life, it wasn't her place to question the order that had been upheld in The Land's Star for countless generations.

A peculiar smell caught her off guard. It was foreign, but strangely familiar. Where had she scented it before..? Twolegs! Multiple, by

the smell of it. It didn't take long for the Treeclan apprentices to pick up on it too. And before anyone had time to react, the Twolegs were already upon them. Only about a bear length off, by the sound of their voices. There had to be about four; two were definitely kits, their high pitched garble was unmistakable. It sounded as if the kits broke away from their guardians, and a heartbeat later emerged from the trees, discovering the apprentices. *Run away, get out of there!* Swiftpaw wanted to scream at the Treeclan cats, but she did not want to be caught spying. She expected Moonpaw and her littermates to scramble up into the safety of the trees, but they didn't. Instead they approached the Twoleg kits who now crouched onto the floor to greet them. Their lanky forepaws were outstretched with pawpads open and grasping. The apprentices sniffed at them, allowing the kits to pet them and run their hairless paws along their backs. One of the cats, the one Swiftpaw did not know, even rolled onto his back to expose his belly to them. *What is that mouse-brain doing?!* Swiftpaw watched as one Twoleg-a she-kit-slowly reached out to scoop up the unsuspecting apprentice, with clanmates watching in curiosity. In a panic, Swiftpaw shot from her bush, across the border, and out in front of Moonpaw, Smokepaw, and Magpiepaw. Adrenaline flowed through her veins and muscles rippled beneath her patched pelt with tension. The instinct to flee to safety nagged her like a buzzing gnat, but she couldn't stand by and let her friends be kitnapped.

"Get away from them!" She yowled, fur bristling. Her heart raced in her chest; blood roared in her ears so loud she could barely hear herself think. Swiftpaw watched helplessly as the strange apprentice rolled back to his paws and stood, looking up at the kits. The kits cooed at him, until one finally took hold. The Treeclan apprentices gasped, and Swiftpaw couldn't help but lash out. She ran forward, striking at the far too grabby kit with claws unsheathed. She felt them dig into its skin and it flinched as it cried out in pain, recoiling. It dropped the apprentice onto the ground with a thud. Swiftpaw hissed up at it, urging the apprentice to follow her while the one kit was distracted. The other Twoleg kit, however, was already after them.

"Run away, hurry, before it catches you!" She begged, unable to wait around any longer. She'd been across the borer far too long

and wasn't willing to be recaptured to live the life of a kittypet. She pelted away, looking back over her shoulder as she went. To her surprise, the Treeclan apprentices were following after her, fur fluffed so badly they looked to be twice their size. Swiftpaw disappeared back into her dense bush, Moonpaw, Smokepaw, and Magpiepaw close behind. The four apprentices huddled together, close to the bush's center where they could not be reached. They panted quietly, looking up with moon wide eyes to see if they had been followed. But they hadn't, and there was a good explanation for why. A Twoleg kit squealed with joy. Swiftpaw crept up to the edge of the bush to see what was going on outside. Back across the border she spotted the Twolegs; all four had gathered together. Between them was a familiar pelt.

"Skunkpaw?" Moonpaw called out quietly, glancing around.
"Where's Skunkpaw?"
Swiftpaw stiffened, looking back at her, eyes dim.
"Is he..?"

"They've got him," she confirmed sadly.

"We have to help him!" Smokepaw snapped, jumping to his paws.

"Not unless you want the Twolegs to nab you too!" Swiftpaw hissed, turning her attention back to the outside world. The Twolegs cooed and pet Skunkpaw for a few moments, smiling down at him. Skunkpaw smiled back, blinking up at them slowly. The Twolegs seemed satisfied with their clan cat catch and began to clamber away, disappearing into the labyrinth of trees.

"Skunkpaw!" Magpiepaw cried out, unable to keep herself hidden. She ran from under the bush back onto Treeclan territory and after the Twolegs before her littermates or Swiftpaw could stop her. The other three apprentices chased her, pouncing on her before she could reach them.

"Skunkpaw! Skunkpaw come back to us! Please come back to us Skunkpaw!" Magpiepaw cried, crouching beneath the weight of Moonpaw and Smokepaw who now sat on top of her.

"He's gone," Swiftpaw breathed, lowering her head and ears.

Magpiepaw trembled, squeezing her eyes shut. Silver tears dripped down her mostly white face, landing in tiny puddles just a whisker below her.

"Mama is going to be devastated," she whispered. The other two Treeclan apprentices looked at each other, tears beginning to fall from their eyes as well. Swiftpaw hasn't known they were all littermates. Sure she'd known about the remaining three, but she had never met or even heard of Skunkpaw before. His fur pattern was so off that she hadn't even realized the four of them were related. But this new discovery made it all the more depressing that he had been taken away.

"I'm so sorry," she mewed quietly. None of the others seemed to pay attention. Swiftpaw took that as her queue to leave. She knew Dewstone and Ladybugbite would want to meet with her soon, she had to get back to them. And back to the right side of the border. She trotted away at first, only giving a slight glance back at the other cats behind her until she was safely back on Grassclan territory. When she got there she faced straight and walked away, head and tail stub drooping. Guilt gnawed at her belly. The hunger she had felt earlier was long gone now, replaced with a hard rock in her stomach. It wasn't her fault the Twolegs had taken Skunkpaw. She had warned them to leave, she thought they'd know better than stick around. She even fought to save them. And yet her attempts had been unsuccessful. Skunkpaw seemed all too eager to be abducted, so she shouldn't feel so bad about it. But then why did she? She racked her brain, replaying the situation in her head over and over again until she became so distracted she hadn't seen where she was going. Something leafy and broad smacked into her as she went, or rather she walked into it. Swiftpaw fell down into an exhausted heap on the ground, laying with one leg half folded under her chest. She sighed, blowing a leaf that had fallen on of her nose away. She blinked, focusing her eyes before standing. When she did, she felt something squish under her pawpad. She lifted her paw, looking down to see the splattered remains of a tiny red berry.

"The bush!" She exclaimed aloud. She had finally found what she was looking for, and by chance too! That little distraction paid off. Swiftpaw sniffed around the bush, examining it closely. A sickening,

yet recognizable smell clung to the rich green leaves. Fearscent, *Waspwing's* fearscent. It was stale, as expected, but still there. Something ginger also caught Swiftpaw's eye. She brought her face closer to it, recognizing it as Waspwing's fur. There wasn't enough stuck to have left any visible evidence of it missing from his pelt; there were only a few strands which probably snagged on a branch as Waspwing tried to get away from the bush. Or while he was pushed into it. Why would Waspwing come near this bush if he were hunting? He certainly wouldn't be searching for prey here, and he definitely wouldn't be afraid if that were the case. Something just didn't add up and the white and black patched apprentice couldn't place her paw on what might have happened. Even now with this evidence, Waspwing's death seemed unclear. They could probably rule it as a poisoning due to the berry juice, but that didn't tell the clan whether he'd accidentally poisoned himself or if he had poisoned himself on purpose. Or worse, if someone else had. But that was for Dewstone to determine. Now that Swiftpaw had the evidence they needed, she had to tell her. But how would she be able to do that? How would she find the bush again? There was only one thing that could come to mind. Carefully, Swiftpaw scent marked the bush, praying that Treeclan didn't see it as Grassclan giving them more territory to claim before dashing off, back to where Waspwing had once laid. When she got there, she let out the loudest yowl she could muster, calling for Dewstone and Ladybugbite. For a while she sat alone, waiting for them to arrive. She played with a leaf in the meantime until they finally appeared. She reflected upon the evidence and tried to find a lead while her clanmates drew closer.

"I found it, I found the bush!" She proclaimed, jumping to her paws as the two older she-cats settled beside her with tails neatly wrapped around their slender legs.

Dewstone looked surprised but pleased. She curled her tail with delight. "Show us."
Swiftpaw followed the traces of her own scents back to the marked yew bush. She sat beside it proudly, shaking the branches so that a couple berries fell onto the earth. They seemed to glow as they reached the forest floor, even in the shade of a cloudy sky.

"Well done, Swiftpaw. And clever thinking too. Now that it's marked, we'll be able to find the bush more easily tomorrow." Dewstone praised, circling around the plant before standing beside the apprentice.

"Did you notice the fearscent?" Swiftpaw pointed out. Dewstone gave the bush a sniff, letting out a thoughtful "*hm*".
"And look, here's a bit of Waspwing's fur!"
The Code Keeper stepped forward at her word, nosing the branches over to catch a glimpse of the thin ginger strands dangling from them. She gave the fur a sniff, eyes narrowing to intense blue slits. Her face twisted with a look of concentration. Swiftpaw guessed that she might be going through the same thought process as she had, though maybe she'd have more success. This was what she was trained for after all. Code Keepers were taught how to solve mysteries so they could find the best solutions for problems. Especially if those problems were crimes committed by clanmembers.

"This is good," Dewstone mewed. "Very very good. It's just what we needed to help us with our case. We certainly have to remember to come back to this bush, before the rains come to wash all of the scents and fur away."

"For now, it's time to head home," Ladybugbite interjected. "We'll tell Whitestar about your find and then see what she wants us to do from there."
Dewstone nodded along in agreement, calling the two she-cats to her side. The three she-cats padded around gathering all the prey Swiftpaw had caught earlier before returning home to report their news.

Chapter 18

[image]

Guilt. Guilt was all that filled Swiftpaw, despite her discovery. Even as she sat inside the den beneath Tall Stone telling Whitestar the evidence she had collected, all she could think about now was what happened with Skunkpaw. In the moment when she had found the bush, she was able to push her feelings aside for the good of the clan and for the justice of Waspwing. But now with the excitement over, all she could feel was shame. She should have been able to save him, she should have been able to do more. But she hadn't, and now Skunkpaw was gone. His littermates must hate her now for sure, and soon their whole clan would be on Grassclan's tail over another trespasser. *As far as I know, the only trespasser is me.* Whitestar dismissed Swiftpaw and Ladybugbite, wanting to be alone with Dewstone to discuss what they would do now. Swiftpaw trudged out of the den with her head hung low, paws numb. She glanced up as she made her way to the fresh-kill pile. The clan gathered in the clearing around Waspwing's body now, sharing tongues with him one last time. Goldensong sat by his head, nuzzling his cheek, while Snowfrost and Mistypaw rubbed his body with mint and rosemary to hide his death scent. Heatherpaw laid with legs tucked beneath her by her deceased mentor's front, her forehead dipped and pressed to his. Swiftpaw wondered if she was praying. Rabbitpaw was flush against her, his white and lynx point pelt blanketing her comfortingly. Meadowcall groomed the fur on Waspwing's flank which had looked unkept when Swiftpaw had last seen it. Now he looked freshly washed, as if he had just settled himself down for a nap. His body was curled in a way to further that illusion. Beetlepatch sat beside Goldensong, crying even harder than she was. Did he have feelings for Waspwing? Swiftpaw didn't know either tom too well, but she'd seen them together a lot, mostly because they were partners. She'd often see them sitting beside each other during guard duty, returning from hunts together, and sharing tongues by the warrior's den. Beetlepatch must have been feeling the impact of the tom's death just as strongly as Waspwing's kin were. Swiftpaw's heart ached for him. The clan had faced great loss

in the past moon and a half, and something told her that this was only the beginning. She wondered if Moonpaw had told Blazestar about what happened yet. How would he react? She hoped he'd see it as a freak incident and recognize that Swiftpaw was only trying to help by trespassing, rather than taking advantage of the situation. Swiftpaw rummaged through the fresh-kill pile as she thought, picking out the smallest piece of prey that she could find. She wasn't very hungry, but she hadn't eaten since the night before. She had to choke something down, even if her body would reject it soon after. A young sparrow lay at the bottom of the pile, tempting Swiftpaw to take it. She picked it up and carried it over to the apprentice's den where she could be alone with her thoughts. The whole clan would be with Waspwing for a little while longer anyways.

"Hey Swiftpaw!"

Or so she thought. Swiftpaw lifted her head to see Frostpaw bounding up to her, a smile on her fluffy face. Swiftpaw grunted a reply, bowing her head to munch on her sparrow as she plucked away its feathers with her claws. Frostpaw tilted her head, settling beside her.

"What's the matter?"
Swiftpaw shook her head slowly. She didn't feel like talking about what happened, at least not at the moment. Frostpaw rested her paws against Swiftpaw's flank. She kneaded her soft white and black patched fur soothingly, looking at her with soft sympathetic eyes. Though she was unaware of what was wrong, she knew that her friend needed some support right now. Swiftpaw felt grateful for her presence, purring quietly as she ate her prey.

"I watched a Treeclan apprentice named Skunkpaw get abducted by Twolegs, and I tried to save him by crossing the border. Well actually...I tried to get him to run away, but he wouldn't. So he was kitnapped..and instead of going after him I let them have him," she finally confessed once she had finished eating.

"Have you told Whitestar?" Frostpaw asked. Swiftpaw looked her with wide, fearful eyes.

"No, of course not! She'll be furious with me for even trying to help a Treeclan cat. You know there's tension between our clans right now."

"Yeah," Frostpaw agreed nodding slowly. "*But* if she finds out from a Treeclan warrior rather than you, you'll be in big big trouble. You need to tell her what happened right away."
Swiftpaw let out a sigh, bending around to give Frostpaw a few thankful licks on the head.

"I should." She agreed, rising to her paws. Frostpaw stood up with her, accompanying her over to Tall Stone. She pressed her flank against hers supportively as they walked, draping her feathery over Swiftpaw's back. Perhaps the guilt would go away once she told Whitestar about what went on. She knew she'd get punished for crossing the border, but surely Whitestar would understand?

"Good luck, I'll wait for you here," Frostpaw mewed as they came to settle by the mouth of the leader's den. Swiftpaw gulped, poking her head inside the crack in Tall Stone.

"Whitestar?" Swiftpaw glanced around, letting her eyes adjust to the darkness. In the back she saw the glowing eyes of her leader, looking back at her.

"Swiftpaw? Come in, please," she invited. Swiftpaw padded in, forcing the fur on her neck to lie flat as she stood before her leader. She glanced back at the entrance to see Frostpaw peering in, laying flat on the floor to avoid being spotted by the siamese she-cat. Whitestar motioned with her tail for Swiftpaw to have a seat, looking at her with curious eyes.

"Is there something wrong?"

"Y-yes, Whitestar...I...I have something to confess."
Whitestar twitched her ears with interest. It took a few heartbeats before Swiftpaw gained the confidence to explain what happened. Her voice shook as she told Whitestar every detail of the event. Her claws scraped the stone floor beneath her paws, grasping for something to help keep her upright. She felt lightheaded, like the words she spoke were draining all the thoughts and feelings from

within her. Whitestar listened, nodding along thoughtfully.

"It was very kind of you to try and help that apprentice, but you must realize that it is not your responsibility to rescue cats born in other clans. You should not feel guilty for something that went on beyond our borders, even if you did cross them," Whitestar meowed calmly.
"I'm glad you told me about this, before I have to hear Blazestar complain about it."
Swiftpaw sighed with relief, fighting back a wetness that had started to pool in her eyes. She sniffled, lifting a paw to wipe her face.

"Thank you," she purred quietly, finding solace in the Grassclan leader's words. It felt like a weight had been lifted off her shoulders, and finally the rock that had settled in her stomach dissolved.

"But," Whitestar continued, rising to her paws. "You still crossed the border, and for that I must punish you. You will be on nursery duty for the next moon. You are to remain in camp during that time period, and you will not be permitted to attend the next gathering."

Swiftpaw chuckled a little, "I should have seen that coming." She dipped her head respectfully to her leader. "Thank you again, Whitestar. I will get to work on the nursery first thing tomorrow morning. Good night."

Another gloomy day greeted Swiftpaw as she emerged from the apprentice's den the next morning. She came out just in time to see the elders carry Waspwing's body out of camp, with Goldensong trailing behind. He was about to be buried, and all those who were awake and in camp watched, stealing their final glimpses of the ginger tom. *May Starclan light your path, Waspwing*, Swiftpaw thought as she padded to the nursery. Her stomach growled at her, tugging her towards the fresh-kill pile. The little sparrow from last night left her famished today, but she knew she couldn't eat until the queens and kits had been fed.

"Good morning everyone," she mewed as she crawled under the honeysuckle bush. Before her eyes lay the four queens of the den. Jaybird had twisted her body around to smooth down the fur along

the base of her tail. Ashwhisker rose to his paws, leaning on his haunches to stretch, holding out one back leg and then the other. And Rosebloom nosed at her belly, mumbling something inaudible to her unborn brood. Meanwhile, Cricketsong was busy washing her fussy quartet of kits, one of which squealed in delight as she noticed Swiftpaw sitting in the den. The kit broke away from her littermates to stand before the apprentice, peering up at her with excitement. Her eyes were beginning to change color now from kitten blue into a dull green. Her clay brown and white pelt was smooth and shiny, freshly groomed, Swiftpaw figured.

"Hi Swiftpaw!" She chirped "Will you play Prey Sight-No Sight with us?"
Swiftpaw bent down to lick her between the ears.

"Maybe later, brown kit. I have to get you all some breakfast first." She stood up straight to look at each of the queens in turn. "What would you all like?"

"I could go for a fat hare right about now, what about you three?" Jaybird purred, looking towards her denmates.

"Hare is fine," Ashwhisker agreed, swiping his tongue around his muzzle.

"Could you actually grab a rabbit for me and the kits? I'd like them to try meat for the first time, and it's customary that kits have rabbit as their first solid meal," Cricketsong requested, three of her four kits tumbling around with excitement.

"Could I have a bird? Any bird will do, I just need a bird," Rosebloom meowed sounding a bit frantic as she turned around in her nest to dig through it then fluff it back up.

"Alright. It'll take me a couple of trips, though," Swiftpaw responded, heading back out into the clearing. Cricketsong's brown kit tried to follow her. Swiftpaw turned and blocked the little kit with a outstretched white paw, her nubby black tail wiggling. "You need to stay here. Your mother once told me you're not allowed to be more than a foxlength away from the nursery until you're given your clan name."

The brown and white kitten looked up at her and pouted.

"Aww c'mon, please take me to the fresh-kill pile will you! I'm so sick of smelling honeysuckle and milk all the time."
Swiftpaw nudged her back towards the mouth of the den, sternness on her face.

"Sorry, I can't. Go back to Cricketsong now before I tell Whitestar about you not listening to your superiors."
The little kit shook, darting back into the nursery without another word. Swiftpaw chuckled, padding over to the fresh-kill pile. She brought a hare and a rabbit over to the nursery to the respective queens, then went back a third time to search the pile for a bird. But there weren't any birds today. That was probably because Swiftpaw was the one who usually caught them. *Mouse dung*, she thought, wiggling her tail. Rosebloom sounded pretty desperate when she had asked for one. She must have been craving it really bad, Swiftpaw would feel bad disappointing her. She would also feel a bit frightened to face the wrath of the very pregnant hungry queen. *I'll have to go out and catch something. But first I better ask*, she decided, trotting over to Tall Stone. Laying on top were Whitestar and Tigerfang, nestled closely together. Their fur brushed against each others, tails intertwined, their purrs thrumming out in unison. They looked so happy together, soaking up whatever bits of sunshine managed to sneak past the clouds as they rolled by. Swiftpaw hated to disturb them.

"Excuse me, Whitestar?" She meowed. Whitestar's eyes fluttered open. She trilled in confusion, blinking before looking down.

"Yes, Swiftpaw?"

"Rosebloom wants a bird for breakfast, but there aren't any. Would it be ok if I go out and catch her one?"
The siamese she-cat thought for a moment, furrowing her brow. At first she looked as though she was against the idea. But her features softened the more she pondered. At last, the leader gave her answer.

"That will be fine. Fetch a Collector to go with you. Once you've caught a bird I want you to gather some bracken for the queens'

nests. But I would advise you to hurry back, I doubt Rosebloom will want to wait very long."
Swiftpaw ducked her head respectfully, heading to the bramble barrier.

I'm so sick of the Forest Patch, she thought with a huff as she arrived at the oak barrier, Sheeptail at her side. Frostpaw had gone out with Cloverpetal, Quailpaw, and Shadowpaw today, leaving Sheeptail to have a day to himself to perform his other duty.

"Could you find some bracken while I hunt please?" Swiftpaw asked politely, trying to use the Silent Language as she spoke. She'd only learned a little bit so far between her warrior lessons, but hoped she could still get her point across. Sheeptail chuckled, whiskers twitching with amusement.

"Of course." He purred, trotting away so that she could have space to hunt. Swiftpaw twitched her ears, straining to hear any scuffling of tiny bird talons on the leaf littered floor. She parted her jaws to taste the air as she stalked through the undergrowth. The smell of a robin found its way to her scent glands, taunting her. She had to catch it. The white and black patched molly dropped into a crouch, slinking forward until the red breasted bird came into her field of vision. It stood at full attention on the uplifted root of a tree. Swiftpaw waited for it to turn around before creeping closer. When she was within a tail-length of her prey she jumped, landing on it just as it spread its wings to take flight. She held its wings down, piercing the feathers with her claws as her head shot forward to deliver a killing blow. The robin went limp beneath her just as the winds began to change. A familiar scent carried on the breeze. A Grassclan patrol must be nearby. But there was another fresh scent mingling with theirs. Treeclan. Curiosity got the better of Swiftpaw, compelling her to bury her robin and head to the border to investigate. Sheeptail could wait a little while longer. When she arrived by the border, a disconcerting sight met her eyes. Cats were growling at one another, lips peeled back into threatening snarls. Hostility hung in the air like mist after a heavy rain. Swiftpaw ducked down into the undergrowth, only wanting to observe what was happening.

"Your clan is the reason why Skunkpaw is gone!" A brown spotted

tom yowled.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Chicorynose insisted, a paw on top of a rather large rabbit. A lump formed in Swiftpaw's throat. They were fighting over Skunkpaw? But why?

"One of your cats was the last to see him before he was taken away. So its your fault he's been abducted," growled another tom, a smokey black cat with darker spots.

"That's ridiculous!" Swiftpaw couldn't help but exclaim, coming out from her hiding spot. She couldn't live with the blame, she had to tell Treeclan what really happened. Cats from both clans turned to look at her, waiting for her to explain herself for the the interruption.
"I was the one who saw Skunkpaw last. Twolegs took him away, not Grassclan warriors. I'm sorry about what happened to him. I tried to get him to run away, but he wouldn't. He went with the Twolegs willingly."

"Liar," hissed a Treeclan apprentice with long brown and white tabby fur. "Skunkpaw wasn't squirrel-brained. He wouldn't willingly go with Twolegs. Maybe you tricked him into getting captured. I wouldn't put it past a rabbit-hearted Grassclan cat to trick others into being taken from their clans."

"What?!"

"You're trying to weaken us by taking our future warriors away. You sick freaks!"

"That's enough," Chicorynose growled, stepping between the two apprentices. Her voice became low, her expression fearsome.
"Learn to control yourself, 'Paw. You'll live longer knowing when to hold your tongue."
The brown spotted tom let out a low growl, thrashing his tail wildly before launching himself at Chicorynose. Swiftpaw gasped, backing away.

"Don't you dare threaten Tigerpaw you mangy crow-food eater! It's bad enough one of our apprentices is gone because of you."

"Woah, get her, dad!" Cheered the Treeclan apprentice. The other Treeclan warriors sprang forward after him, swiping at and bowling over the Grassclan patrol. Cats battled left and right, yowls of anger ringing through the forest. Chicorynose clawed and kicked up wildly at smokey Robinspots' belly as he stood over-top of her. The Grassclan deputy flung the Treeclan warrior off, into another warrior. The two warriors recovered quickly, getting up and going after Chicorynose. But another cat intervened. It was Sheeptail. Even with his bad ears he must have been able to hear the battle. He swiped at the brown spotted tom, spitting.

"Robinspots, Beetlenose, starting needless battles? Have you no common sense?"
Robinspots hissed, swiping at Sheeptail's muzzle. Sheeptail dodged his attack, lunging forward to knock the other tom onto his side. He jumped onto him, scratching his shoulder and flank. The Treeclan warrior let out a howl of pain, trying to throw him off. Swiftpaw watched the battle in awe, frozen in place. Until a cat toppled her over. She looked up to see Tigerpaw hovering above her, lips drawn back into a devilish smirk. She bent down, biting Swiftpaw's scruff. She shook her like a piece of moss before tossing her a tail-length away. Swiftpaw fell to the floor with a thud, sitting up to gaze at the she-cat with anger. Tigerpaw's muscles rippled under her pelt as she charged at Swiftpaw again. She leapt, but before she could land on her, Swiftpaw countered. She ducked forward, turning like a snake and twisted around, scraping a hind leg against Tigerpaw's belly. Droplets of blood splattered down her thigh, staining her white fur red. Tigerpaw yowled, backing away. Swiftpaw jumped to her paws, her muscles bunching. Sheeptail darted past her, an enemy warrior at his heels.

"Run home, Swiftpaw. Get help!" he commanded, throwing himself back into the fray. Swiftpaw nodded briskly, darting away. Tigerpaw followed after her, leaping onto her back. She slashed at Swiftpaw's shoulder, leaving a rather large, gushing wound. Determined to get away and fetch help, Swiftpaw twisted, kicking the larger she-cat off of her. She rose to her paws, turning tail to flee in the direction of home. Pain surged through her but she did not care at the moment, she had to complete her mission.

"Yeah that's right, run away you coward!"
Swiftpaw ignored Tigerpaw's taunt, continuing to press forward. She uncovered the robin she had caught earlier before heading back to camp.

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Swiftpaw burst through the bramble tunnel like a fox in a fit, whipping her head around wildly. The heat of battle sharpened her senses, making her more hyperactive. Luckily she did not have to wait to gain cats attention, as they seemed to have smelled trouble coming already. She dropped her robin at her paws, staring at the crowd which had gathered.

"There's a fight taking place at the Treeclan border!" She yowled. At hearing this, Whitestar stood up on Tall Stone, giving a brief nod to Tigerfang who jumped down to stand by the boulder's base.

"Tigerfang, Ladybugbite, Ambereye, Gingerstrike, follow Swiftpaw back to the Forest Patch," she ordered. Rosebloom snuck out of the nursery, slinking over to stand in front of Swiftpaw. She gave the apprentice a look before snatching the robin, scurrying back to the honeysuckle bush. *Weird.* Swiftpaw snorted, turning tail to lead the battle patrol back to the forest.
It seemed like reinforcements had arrived just in time. Most of the Grassclan patrol were badly wounded, but continued to fight with everything they had. Swiftpaw located Tigerpaw and pounced, leading the attack. She landed backwards on the Treeclan apprentice, gripping her haunches, digging her front claws into her deeply. She clawed her shoulders with her back paws and kicked the back of her head. Tigerpaw bucked and jumped around, trying to throw the smaller apprentice off of her. She flipped herself onto her back, squishing Swiftpaw beneath her. But the patched molly wouldn't let go. Ladybugbite came speeding past, headbutting Tigerpaw away. Swiftpaw jumped to her paws, briefly dipping her head respectfully to the young warrior. Around them, more of their clanmates in joined the fight. Now Treeclan was outnumbered, pushed back to their side of the border.

"Treeclan retreat!" Beetlepatch, the smoky spotted warrior yowled. At once his clammates sheathed their claws, struggling and

wriggling away from their enemies. They tucked their tails as they climbed into the trees.
"This isn't over," he growled, climbing up after them. Chicorynose tilted her head back, letting out a triumphant cry. Grassclan's warriors caterwauled their victory along with her, their voices ringing out in unison. Thrill filled Swiftpaw from nose to nubby tail-tip as she yowled out with her clan. Her first of many battles had been won.

Chapter 19

[image]

The border skirmish from before was the first of many more to come. Grassclan had to be cautious when marking the Treeclan border now. Cats would leap out from the trees to scare away approaching patrols, sometimes directly onto them. Arguments always ensued, threats and small scuffles were common. They always seemed to fight over the same main points: the disappearance of Skunkpaw, and the death of Waspwing. It was during the sunhigh patrol after the first border skirmish which made mention of the warrior's death. Beetlepatch accused Treeclan of being responsible in a similar way that Treeclan blamed Grassclan for Skunkpaw. They were both unjust accusations, but they worked to add fuel to the fire. Chaos ensued, and every cat hoped that things would cool off soon.
In an attempt to calm everyone's minds, Whitestar held an important ceremony.

"Today is a very important day for the clan. Cricketsong's kits have survived the first two moons of their lives, and are ready to be introduced to the clan."
Cricketsong and her mate Cowpatch sat by the base of Tall Stone. Between them sat their restless brood of kits, with fur sleek and neatly groomed. They tried their best to sit still and remain calm, but it was obvious that the four of them were ready to burst from their contained energy. Swiftpaw watched them nearby the medicine cat's den where she lay sharing a hare with Mistypaw. After a half moon she was still stuck with nursery duty, and because of it she'd grown close to the kits. She was quite fond of them, and found herself feeling as protective of them as a queen. Or at least as an older sister. Spending time with kits had never crossed the young molly's mind before, but now that she had a little experience with them she could see herself wanting a few of her own someday. But that wouldn't be for many seasons to come. For now Swiftpaw was satisfied helping with the care of Cricketsong's litter.
Whitestar jumped down from Tall Stone to stand before the happy

family. It was unusual, since ceremonies and meetings were usually held with her perched on top of the ancient boulder. But this was special. The survival of kits was a blessing from Starclan that was to be rightfully celebrated. Especially since these cats were the leader's kin. Not long ago, Swiftpaw had learned through spending time in the nursery that Cricketsong and Chicorynose were littermates. When they were young, Whietstar-and a now deceased warrior-were brought to the clan as kits, and adopted by their mother. Though this did not make them all officially related, they had been raised together. The familial bond was still there, and it showed. Excitement glimmered in the siamese she-cat's eyes as she looked over each of the four kittens in turn.
"I say these names before the spirits of our ancestors, so that they may hear and recognize these kits as members of our clan. Grassclan welcomes Nectarkit, Pollenkit, Lilackit, and Tulipkit into the world," she declared, touching her nose to the forehead of each kit in turn. First the brown and white tabby, next the brown tabby, followed by the white and lilac kit, and finally the brown and white kit. The clan raised their voices, caterwauling their new clanmates' names.

"Nectarkit! Pollenkit! Lilackit! Tulipkit!"

"It's great to see the clan so excited," commented Mistypaw, tearing a piece of flesh off the hare. "It's a nice change from the hostile, on edge feeling that's hung in the air for so long."

"I know what you mean," Swiftpaw agreed between a bite of their prey. "I can't wait for the clans to let these accusations go already. It's driving everyone batty. By the way, aren't you supposed to fast? Tonight's your meeting at the Moon Cavern, isn't it?"

"Yes," Mistypaw mewed in response, licking her lips. "But Goldensong is going alone this time. Rosebloom said she believes her kits will be coming soon, and we don't want to take a chance and leave her without a medicine cat. Snowfrost is staying behind, and I'm staying with her so that in case Rosebloom *does* have her kits, I will be here to learn how to help." She groomed her chest fur nervously before she continued eating.

"You've never delivered kits before? But what about Cricketsong's

litter?"

"They were born while I was still in the nursery," Mistypaw explained. "I missed the chance to help by one day. They were born the day before my apprentice ceremony. Everyone except the medicine cats and Ashwhisker had to wait outside while Cricketsong gave birth."
Swiftpaw nodded in acknowledgement.

"Well, I'm glad you'll still be here. I think I'm going mad being stuck in camp all day. But it's a lot easier having another apprentice around who understands what it's like to be stuck here most of the time."
Mistypaw flicked Swiftpaw's ear with her tail playfully.

"Oh you're acting as if it's such a bad thing! Besides, I thought you were ok with nursery duty? The queens certainly appreciate the extra help you provide. They're very grateful to have the chance to relax and leave camp for a while, while you tire the kits out."
Swiftpaw let out a soft sigh, turning her gaze onto the blue grey sky above.

"I'm sure they are, but I'm beat. I feel like I'll forget everything I've learned while I'm trapped here playing baby games and changing wool." She rolled onto her side, raising a forepaw to rest over her face. She let out an exaggerated moan of exhaustion as a *mrrow* of laughter erupted from Mistypaw. The fluffy silver she-cat rose to her paws as she saw her sister approaching from the corner of her eye. The two littermates bumped heads, laying down beside each other.

"Don't be so dramatic, Swiftpaw." Frostpaw teased, letting out an amused purr. Her pale green eyes gleamed, tail-tip swishing ever so slightly. She must have picked up on the conversation as she approached. Swiftpaw felt hot with embarrassment.
"If you want, I'll help you practice whenever I'm left in camp. It'll help you prepare for having a partner. And prepare you for a future apprentice."
Swiftpaw perked up, scrambling to her feet. She had never thought of having her own apprentice, considering that she still was one. She was only eight moons old, was it really wise to anticipate

having a cat of her own to teach when she clearly did not know much as of now?

"You really think I'll get an apprentice?" She asked hesitantly.

"Well of course I do. When we become warriors, at least, I think we'll both get one!"

"I'm sure Cricketsong will insist upon you mentoring one of her kits, considering how close you've become with them," Mistypaw chimed wisely. She was such an intelligent cat. Even at a young age she seemed to possess the soul of a wise, experienced healer. Swiftpaw admired that a lot. She smiled sweetly at Mistypaw as she wondered which kit she might mentor one day. Speaking of kits, one of Cricketsong's litter came bounding up to the three she-cats, excitement radiating from her puffy downy pelt.

"Swiftpaw! Swiftpaw! My name is Tulipkit!!" The kit bounced. Swiftpaw chuckled dipping her head.

"It's nice to meet you, Tulipkit."
Tulipkit giggled, stepping forward to swipe at her muzzle. Frostpaw and Mistypaw exchanged amused looks.

"You're so silly, you already know who I am! Can you show me around camp, pleeeaase?"
Swiftpaw exchanged a glance with Mistypaw, then Frostpaw before standing up, leaning back on her haunches.

"Of course-"
But before she could finish her sentence, a yowl rang out across camp. Cats began to emerge from their dens, heading towards the bramble barrier.

"What's that?" Tulipkit asked, eyes wide with confusion.

"Tornface smells trouble," Swiftpaw explained, nudging the kit in the direction of the nursery. "Run along and hide now, I'll let you know when it's safe." Tulipkit shimmied, parting her jaws to protest. But Swiftpaw fixed her with a glance, sending the kit scurrying back to her mother. With Tulipkit out of the way, the white and black

patched apprentice approached the edge of camp, waiting for whatever or whoever may be coming. Through the tunnel burst a warrior from the sunhigh patrol, along with a Collecting warrior who had accompanied Snowfrost on another herb gathering mission. Their fur stood on end, and blood dripped from their pelts. The smell of fear clouded around them like a fog. Smelling this, Whitestar emerged from her den where she had been spending the hottest part of the day with Butterflytail. Tigerfang, who'd been sitting just outside, padded beside her.

"What's happened now?" the Grassclan leader asked begrudgingly.

"We've been ambushed by another Treeclan patrol," Gingerstrike responded, his voice hoarse most likely from yowling at the enemy. His rich ruddy fur was darkened by thick red blood. His right ear looked like it had been bitten and pulled on. On his opposite side, his eye was swollen shut from a rather large vertical slash. Swiftpaw resisted the urge to gasp outwardly, frightened for the tom that he may lose his vision.
"there's so many warriors this time, it couldn't possibly be a patrol. I think this was a planned attack!"

Whitestar stepped forward to rest her tail on his shoulder.
"Grassclan honors your bravery, Gringerstrike. Go see Snowfrost and Mistypaw, we'll handle this."

"But Snowfrost hasn't come back!" Bumblethroat, the Collector interrupted. "She wandered off, I don't know where. By the time I'd gone to look for her, Treeclan had jumped out at me."
Whitestar didn't seem all too concerned, twitching her whiskers.

"I see. Along with bringing in reinforcements now we will also have to search for our missing medicine cat. For the sake of our warriors, I hope she's standing by ready to heal. I'll need all of my fighting warriors to come with myself and Chicorynose, as well as Quailpaw and Swiftpaw. Tigerfang, you are in charge until we return."
The fur on the back of Swiftpaw's neck began to rise. She supposed that the need for fighters outweighed any punishment she had been given. At least she was finally allowed to leave camp.

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Whitestar led the battle patrol far across the meadow. According to Bumblethroat, the fight was taking place at the cusp of the Treeclan border by Twolegplace. Though Swiftpaw was beginning to hate the sight of the woods, she was glad they'd get a chance to be in a part of the Forest Patch she'd rarely gone to. As they galloped along, Swiftpaw stole a glance at her leader and deputy, who kept perfect pace with one another. Fury and determination radiated from them, a stern look fixed on their faces. Their muscles rolled beneath their pelts with each bound and leap they took. They looked so much like warriors now. Before Whitestar and Chicorynose seemed so beyond that life, held high above it by their ranks. But at the end of the day they were still ready to protect the clan with every breath in their bodies, just as any warrior would.

"Grassclan attack!" Whitestar caterwauled as the patrol charged into the brawl. Almost all of Treeclan's Fighting warriors had to be here assaulting Grassclan's border patrol. Among them were a few of their many apprentices. Swiftpaw launched herself at the nearest one, a rather small lilac and cream tortoiseshell. The molly whipped around and hissed at her as the white and black patched molly swiped at her muzzle with claws outstretched. The she-cat headbutted into her, bowling her over.

"Great job, Tinypaw! Show that rabbit-heart who's boss!" Yowled a Treeclan warrior as she dodged a blow from Whitestar, who landed another just as soon as she had. Tinypaw looked at Swiftpaw with disgust. She dove her head down to bite into her neck. Blood rushed from the wound, causing Swiftpaw to gag. The bite would not kill her, but the pain of it certainly might. Swiftpaw kicked at her enemy's underbelly wildly, growling and shaking her head. She needed to get Tinypaw off of her, or this fight would be over before it'd even began. With one more hard kick Tinypaw went flying. She landed a foxlength away in a perfect crouch, rising to face the Grassclan apprentice. Her amber eyes narrowed as she stalked forward. Swiftpaw jumped to her feet, feeling lightheaded as she gained her footing. The metallic scent of blood assaulted her scent glands; breathing was a challenge. But she wasn't ready to tuck tail and run home. She had to beat Tinypaw, no matter what. The two apprentices circled each other for a few heartbeats before running forward. With a mighty yowl they both swiped at one another,

claws outstretched. Swiftpaw landed a low blow to Tinypaw's jaw while Tinypaw clawed at her eyes. She managed to leave a nice scratch over Swiftpaw's right one. The white and black patched molly let out a yelp of surprise, backing away.

"Greytuft's right, you are a coward," Tinypaw sneered, arching her back. Rage burned in Swiftpaw's belly. She jumped at the enemy apprentice once more, standing on her back legs. She dropped her weight down, crushing the smaller she-cat beneath her. Tinypaw snarled in protest, wiggling beneath the larger she-cat. Swiftpaw rolled the tortoiseshell molly onto her back before she could escape, kicking at her belly. Blood pooled from the scratches she made, the ones from earlier deepening. It stained the white fur on Swiftpaw's back right leg, turning her black left one a sticky brown. Tinypaw cried out, thrashing wildly. Tears welled up in her eyes as she looked up at Swiftpaw, pain and hatred glowing within them. Sympathetic, Swiftpaw finally let her go, shooting her a challenging glare. Tinypaw whimpered, scurrying away with her tail tucked between her legs. Swiftpaw let out a triumphant yowl, turning tail to find another opponent to fight. Energy surged through her body like electricity, bringing power to her limbs and a sensation of vitality. In the fray she spotted Shadowpaw backed against an elm tree, cornered by two Treeclan apprentices. She charged forward, pushing her way past them with a mighty shove. She threw a front paw blow at a ginger and white tom before coming to stand beside Shadowpaw. He leaned his rear against hers, each of them turning to face an opponent.

"Oh Swiftpaw, you're my hero," he swooned, sarcasm apparent. Swiftpaw rolled her eyes, an excited smirk pulling at her lips.

"You can grovel at my feet later. For now, let's kick these tree lickers' tails!"
Each of them sprang forward, tearing into a Treeclan apprentice. They chased them towards each other so that they could each attack one another's opponent. Overwhelmed, the Treeclan apprentices snarled, scrambling up the nearest tree in defeat. For a moment, Swiftpaw and Shadowpaw were able to catch their breath. Around them, cats were still locked in combat. This skirmish was worst than the one a half moon ago, but the results were the same.

Slowly but surely, Grassclan was sending Treeclan running. Swiftpaw looked around at her clanmates who were still engaging in battle.
Ladybugbite bit into Beetlenose's hind leg, causing the tom to cry. Quailpaw faced off against a golden Treeclan apprentice with one eye shut, swiping at her face while avoiding the other's paws; the golden she-cat was trying to trip her, but the Grassclan apprentice kept her balance. Ambereye and Sheeptail teamed up against Shadeleaf, knocking her to the ground. By now, Chicorynose had defeated Greytuft with Whitestar and had moved on to fight Treeclan's deputy, Thornberry. Swiftpaw watched intently as the tom bounced around and ducked the Grassclan's deputy's blows. He used his powerful legs to kick at her, tearing open her shoulder and her flank. He leaped onto her back, earning a yowl. Worry seeped into Swiftpaw. Would her mentor be defeated? Brashly she put herself into the fight. Shadowpaw tried to yell at her to get back, but Swiftpaw couldn't hear. Blood roared so loudly in her ears that she felt as if she'd gone deaf. Her thoughts were blocked by the noise, all except one: help Chicorynose. With a yowl she leaped onto Thornberry's back, clawing at him just as he was clawing at her mentor. Thornberry whipped around, confused, trying to throw the apprentice off. He hissed and snapped, but Swiftpaw wouldn't let go. She bought time for Chicorynose to slip away and knock the tom down. As he went falling Swiftpaw finally got off of him, landing a tail length away to watch Grassclan's deputy pin Treeclan's. Thornberry went limp beneath her, a defeated look in his eye. Chicorynose grabbed his scruff, tossing him away. She gave him one last hiss to send him away with.

"Treeclan, to me!" He called. At once, the last of Treeclan's warrior went falling back, gathering around their deputy. Grassclan's warriors chased them over the border, tails fluffed and kinked over their backs threateningly. Thornberry sent his cats climbing into the trees, watching as each disappeared. When all his warriors were safe, he shot one last glare at Grassclan.

"Tell Blazestar I have a bone to pick with him at the upcoming Gathering," Whitestar meowed, tail-tip twitching ever so slightly. The siamese she-cat stood tall, with voice even-tempered. But her eyes showed a different emotion: displeasure. Thornberry narrowed

his eyes before leaping up onto a branch without a word. He jumped from one to the next until his disappeared into the leaves. Before Grassclan could vocalize their victory, a blood curdling yowl split through the air.

"Ryestep!" a cat cried. All eyes turned to its source. Snowfrost sat with paws pressed deeply into a cat's wound, blood coating her muzzle, chest, and front legs. Tears streamed down her face as more blood squirted onto her. At first it was hard to distinguish who it was that Snowfrost was trying to save. Upon approach it was easy to confirm the grey-brown coat belonged to Ryestep. His amber eyes were wide, cloudy and dilated, the light that once shined in them long since winked out. *Where did she come from*? Swiftpaw wondered. She hadn't seen Snowfrost during the battle at all. Now out of nowhere she was here, with paws buried into a dead warrior. How had nobody noticed him dying until now?

"Who did this?" Whitestar demanded to know, coming to stand before her fallen clanmate. Snowfrost shook her head slightly.

"I didn't see. All I heard was a sharp yowl and I rushed into action. Whoever did this split open his throat. I thought I could stop the bleeding by putting pressure on the wound while I waited for a warrior to help me move him. Then they could take my place so I could run off to find cobweb. But nobody came. Everyone kept on fighting. And now...Ryestep has left to join Starclan." A quiver hung in Snowfrost's mew. She dipped her head low, avoiding the gaze of those who looked on, shoulders shaking as she let out a sob. Swiftpaw came to stand beside Whitestar, noticing the strange discreet twist of the medicine cat's muzzle. Was she...smiling? Swiftpaw shook her head, clearing it of the thought. Why would Snowfrost smile about something like this, that would be ridiculous. She was sobbing for Starclan's sake. Whitestar bent down to touch her nose to the nose of her fallen warrior.

"You have fought bravely, Ryestep. May Starclan receive you with honors tonight." She stood tall once again, casting her pale blue eyes onto each of her cats. "Come, let us return back to camp. There is much to discuss."

Chapter 20

[image]

"Death does not make a battle won. Treeclan may think they are clever by taking away one of our warriors, but I assure you all that this casualty will not weaken us. We will remember Ryestep forever in our hearts, and as we go on to fight the next battle, we will hold his memory close," Whitestar meowed from her place atop Tall Stone. Upon the battle patrol's return to Grassclan's camp, a clan meeting had been called. Passion sparked from the leader's pelt, sending a surge of urgency to every cat in the clearing. Those gathered below the ancient stone hung onto Whitestar's every word with murmurs of agreement rippling around. The medicine cats circulated throughout the crowd as the meeting went on, cleaning cuts and patching the wounds of those who fought. Swiftpaw was having her neck wrapped with goldenrod and cobweb as she watched Whitestar pace along her perch.

"What Treeclan doesn't know is that we use loss as a way to gain. They believe us to value each other as well as a parasite values its host. They do not see that we have families to protect, cats we care about with the deepest caverns of our hearts. Not anymore. But we will show them that we are united more closely than they'll ever be."

The white and black patched apprentice turned her eyes to see Rosebloom sprawled out over Ryestep's body, her cries of sorrow echoing as loud as the thunder which had begun to rumble above them. Today no cat made a move to run for cover. Though Grassclan hated the rain, nobody wanted to miss out on Whitestar's speech. But it was hard for Swiftpaw to pay attention. She felt sick to her stomach for Rosebloom. Her kits were due at any time and her mate had not made it to see them born. Ryestep had been so excited for their arrival, too. Swiftpaw remembered the tom coming into the nursery, delivering treats and specially requested prey to his beloved, mewing words of admiration to her even while Rosebloom complained of being as fat as a kittypet. They made a beautiful couple, it pained Swiftpaw to see them torn apart. *Watch over her in Starclan, Ryestep. Rosebloom still needs you.*

"Once our clans were at peace, but now we are no longer. I will do my best to prevent a war from breaking out, but I fear the pressure has become too much to hold back. I will try to ease the mind of Blazestar at the Gathering in the next half moon. This fighting has to stop. I want no further confrontation with Treeclan until then. If a patrol tries to start a fight, walk away. I do not want to see any more cats harmed or killed over petty assumptions."
The words of agreement spoken before turned into yowls of protest. Swiftpaw snapped her eyes to look on at those who now disagreed.

"How can you ask us to do that?" Caterwauled Butterflytail. "Treeclan will think of us as cowards!"

Ashwhisker's meow trembled with worry as he spoke up. "What if this tempts them to take over the border?"

"Or attack our camp?" meeped Quailpaw, as cobwebs were being wrapped around her head and eye. Frostpaw pressed closely into her side, grooming her cheek. Whitestar waved her tail and dipped her head, asking for silence.

"If Blazestar orders his cats to step paw over the border, then he is a bigger fool than I realized. Until he proves to be, we will not worry about that. We will go about our normal lives, as if we were still in a time of peace. But we will not let our guard down. Apprentices are to have increased battle training in case the worst should happen. Every cat is to stick with their partner. Those who do not have one will be temporarily assigned."
Even apprentices? Swiftpaw wondered.
"Until further action is taken on Treeclan's part, that's all I have to say. I need to speak with my senior warriors now. Chicorynose, will you partner up any single cats?"

"Yes, Whitestar," Chicorynose meowed as she ducked her head. The siamese she-cat gave a curt nod, leaping off of Tall Stone. Cats without partners began to crowd around Grassclan's deputy. One called for the apprentices to join them. The six of them did as they were told, listening as cats were paired off. Warriors were assigned first, then Rosebloom-once assigned to Ryestep-was assigned to Ashwhisker, and finally the apprentices were partnered.
"I am pairing you 'Paws off randomly, so please don't be too

disappointed. Remember, this isn't permanent. Shadowpaw, I want you with Frostpaw, Heatherpaw with Quailpaw, and Rabbitpaw you will stay with Swiftpaw."
What?! Swiftpaw inwardly gasped, casting her bright blue gaze onto the fluffy lynx point tom. Rabbitpaw turned to look back at her, a darkness in his eye. His tail-tip was already twitching with annoyance, and the two hadn't even come within a foxlength of each other yet. Of all the cats in the clan, why did she have to be with him?

"Don't think I'm going to enjoy the time I have to spend with you," Rabbitpaw growled as he came to sit beside her. Swiftpaw looked at him with disbelief. The two had never gotten along, but she thought they had made progress. He had defended her at her first gathering after all, and they hadn't fought in a while. At least not physically. Mentally, however, the pair were at each other's throats. Rabbitpaw often shot her dirty looks, even when it wasn't warranted, while Swiftpaw would make faces at him while his back was turned. But she thought it was all in good fun. That's what rivals were supposed to do, right? So why did Rabbitpaw treat her more like an enemy and less like the friendly competition that she was?

"Like I'd enjoy being with you," she scoffed, wiggling her tail as she padded past. Rabbitpaw rolled his eyes, following behind her.

"Yeah I know, you'd rather be partnered with Frostpaw," he responded as he watched Swiftpaw slip into the apprentice's den. She settled herself down into her nest, watching him do the same.

"No, Frostpaw likes Quailpaw, I wouldn't want to get in the way of that," she protested. The two had never admitted it before, but it was obvious that they liked each other. Swiftpaw recalled when she had first started keeping an eye on Frostpaw and her littermates. The fluffy silver and white tabby would do whatever it'd take to impress Quailpaw when they'd go out on patrol. She'd help her catch harder prey like mice and vole while Quailpaw would give her demonstrations on advanced battle techniques. They often shared their nests with each other, and almost every sunhigh for the past moon the two could be seen sharing tongues by the apprentice's den.
Rabbitpaw let out a snort of agreement, glancing away. For a

heartbeat he remained silent before he turned his eyes onto his new partner. Swiftpaw watched him as she cleaned a wound on her shoulder, a malicious smirk spreading across the tom's muzzle.

"Then you'd rather be spending your time mooning after Shadowpaw and Mistypaw." There was no tease in his tone, only bitterness. Though Rabbitpaw's smirk remained, it was obvious it was one fueled by displeasure. Swiftpaw's body went stiff, her pelt growing hot with embarrassment.

"I don't moon over them!"

"Yeah, you do. I see how you play with Shadowpaw. All the apprentices think you look like a couple of lovebirds in Newleaf. But only I seem to notice the way you look at my sister, batting your pretty blue eyes while she tells you about her day."

"Shadowpaw's my best friend, and Mistypaw is interesting to talk to. It doesn't mean I like either of them," Swiftpaw growled defensively, her nubby tail wagging. *The nerve!* She snorted while Rabbitpaw shot her a look. He didn't believe a word she was saying. But Swiftpaw didn't care. Only she knew the truth. She wasn't going to let assumptions and rumors get to her. If she did like either of her friends, she'd come to the conclusion on her own terms.
"Why don't you mind your own business?"

"I would if you weren't always sticking your nose into the lives of my whole family. First Frostpaw, then Mistypaw, and now Dewstone and my moms! It's like your obsessed or something," Rabbitpaw countered, tail lashing. Swiftpaw bit back a snarky reply, one that would tempt her to reveal Dewstone's request. She'd been asked to watch over Rabbitpaw and his littermates, so of course she was always sticking her nose into their business. But she didn't know if she should tell him about it. Rabbitpaw already disliked her, what would he say if he found out she had been watching them to see if anything weird was going on? He probably wouldn't like it. Swiftpaw let out a growl of frustration, rolling onto her back. She could feel Rabbitpaw's eyes still trained on her, burning a hole in her pelt.

"If you're gonna stare at something, go stare at your reflection in the

river," she snarled, not responding to the tom's previous remark.

"Like you stare at my sister?" he bit back. Swiftpaw flipped back onto her belly, rising to her paws.

"Look. There isn't anything wrong with me keeping an eye on my friends. And recently I was told by Whitestar to speak with Dewstone, I didn't start hanging around her to spite you. And as for your moms, of course I'm starting to become closer with them. I'm camp bound, stuck on nursery duty, and bored out of my mind. So excuse me if I wanna take the time to get to know the clanmates I'm taking care of," she meowed, blue eyes blazing as she went to stand by Rabbitpaw's nest. She hovered above him, glaring down at him challengingly.
"Is that a good enough explanation for why I 'stick my nose' into your family's lives?"
Rabbitpaw shrank in his nest, his ears pinning back against his head. He parted his jaws to speak but no sound came out. Instead he closed his mouth and glanced away, speechless. Swiftpaw gave a curt nod as if to say "that's what i thought," before going back to her nest. She circled around in the wool for a heartbeat before settling down, resting her chin on her paws. Her body ached and her heart raced. Between the battle from earlier and the argument with Rabbitpaw, Swiftpaw was feeling wiped out. She was grateful for the silence that had settled over the den-beyond the occasional rumble of thunder-taking the time to lick her wounds and calm herself. As time passed, more of her denmates began filtering in until all six apprentices were safe and sound in their shelter. A soft murmur echoed through the rocky walls as they began to talk amongst themselves. Shadowpaw tried to pry into Rabbitpaw's thoughts, asking him why he seemed so down. But the fluffy lynx point tom didn't say a word. He merely glanced away. Shadowpaw's eyes then turned to lock with Swiftpaw's, silently asking her about what happened. Swiftpaw gave her head a slight shake, telling him she'd talk about it later. She tore her eyes away from her friend's to get a glimpse of Frostpaw and Quailpaw. The pair grabbed hold of their fleece nests, dragging them closer together until they overlapped. Only then did the two she-cats settle down in them, their bodies pressing together.

"Do you think Treeclan really wants to start a war with us?" Quailpaw asked quietly to no one in particular, her voice filled with concern.

"Whitestar said she'd try to prevent it," Heatherpaw assured, lifting a paw to groom. "Starclan knows we don't need anymore cats dying for no reason...."
Empathetically, Rabbitpaw rose from his nest. He hesitantly brought himself to Heatherpaw's side, laying down beside her. Along her shoulder he began to rasp his tongue calmly while pressing his paws into her flank, kneading the lilac she-cat's fur. A low purr rumbled in his throat as he blinked at Heatherpaw slowly with soft, deep blue eyes. Swiftpaw looked on with astonishment. She never expected to see Rabbitpaw act that way towards anyone; he wasn't even that affectionate with his littermates. But she supposed that he might feel sorry for her. Heatherpaw had lost her mentor only half a moon ago, it would take time for her to overcome her grief. Swiftpaw could only imagine what it felt like. Over the past couple moons she had come to realize a mentor wasn't only a teacher, but a friend, and in a way a mentor was also like parent. Losing one must feel like losing one's kin. Rabbitpaw may not know what it felt like, but Swiftpaw was sure he didn't have to to be understanding. She wondered if he'd act this way with any of his other peers if they were unlucky enough to lose someone close to them. Or if Heatherpaw was a special case because of some hidden feeling the tom may have for her. As she thought about it, Swiftpaw acknowledged that she didn't know Rabbitpaw as well as she'd like. Though she had been keeping her eye on him and his littermates, it did not give her any insight on him beyond a surface level. She judged him based on his outward actions, and on the way he behaved while viewing her as an outsider. She didn't know him on a more personal level like a friend might. But they were partners now, if only temporarily. Perhaps in the time they'd have to spend together, Swiftpaw could come to understand the fluffy lynx point tom better. Deep down she hoped that she could. Though she was fine with a friendly rivalry, she couldn't stand being enemies with a cat from her own clan. She had to make things right, even if it took spending all of her time with Rabbitpaw.

The next day brought the most sunshine that there had been since

the Gathering. As Swiftpaw pushed her way past the entrance of the apprentice's den, a warm shaft of light rested itself upon her face. The patched molly blinked as she moved out of its way into the shade of Tall Stone. There she rummaged through the fresh-kill pile, pulling out a couple of hares to drag to the nursery. As she turned with the first in her jaws, Rabbitpaw came bounding over. For a heartbeat they stared at one another in silence. Swiftpaw gestured towards the hare, seeing if her new partner would lend her a paw. To her relief he did, grabbing the prey and taking the lead towards the honeysuckle bush. Swiftpaw followed behind. Cricketsong's kits came tumbling out to greet them as they caught whiff of the apprentices approaching. Tulipkit pranced up to Swiftpaw, picking up the foreleg of the hare she was carrying. She proudly helped her bring it inside, sitting on top of it once it was settled.

"Breakfast!" She announced. The queens let out amused purrs, stepping up to have their share. Rabbitpaw led the remaining kits inside, herding them towards their mother before dropping the second hare beside the first.

"Rambunctious bunch," he remarked, licking blood from his lips. Cricketsong dipped her head in agreement, her kits squeaking in protest. "You three better eat so you can grow up to be big brave warriors like me."
Swiftpaw had to suppress a snort. Although he may be big, Rabbitpaw hadn't proven himself to be very brave from what she'd seen. Then again, she needed to get to know him better before drawing that conclusion. But it seemed ironic to identify a cat named after a rabbit as brave.
Cricketsong's kits did as the tom said, joining the queens in their meaty feast. Ashwhisker hovered around the group, making sure everyone was being well fed. He turned his muzzle towards the visiting apprentices, giving them an approving nod. Seeing this sign, Swiftpaw dipped her head, turning tail to leave. With the day's first task completed, she could now reward herself with some breakfast. She made her way back to the fresh-kill pile, listening as Rabbitpaw's footsteps followed after her. Did he really have to go her everywhere she went?

"I'm sure you'll be happy to know that I won't be trailing after you

all day," he meowed, settling on her one side to look through the pile. "I'm going out with Gingerstrike at sunhigh. And I've been chosen to go to the gathering tonight." He sounded as if he was almost bragging. Swiftpaw wiggled her tail, about to say something nasty, getting cut off as Rabbitpaw continued to speak.
"I'm only following you now because I'm trying to adjust to having a partner. That's what we've been told we are, and I intend to follow through with acting like it."
Swiftpaw nodded, pulling out a mouse to drop at her paws.

"I get that," she mewed, bending down to take a bite. "Maybe we can finally come to understand each other more in the meantime?" she suggested hesitantly.
Rabbitpaw gave a shrug, selecting a mole of his own to chew on. *At least that's something*, she thought with a sigh.
The day went on as normal once Rabbitpaw left for training. Day turned into night; the moon peeked through the cover of clouds as moonhigh rolled around. Swiftpaw watched as cats lined up and disappeared through the bramble tunnel, on their way to the gathering. While she waited for their return, she made her way over to the nursery. She settled down in Cricketsong's nest, allowing the kits to cuddle up by her belly. Swiftpaw would be watching them this evening, along with Rosebloom who was already fast asleep in a neighboring nest. Soon she'd find out what the other clans had to say, and then she could fall asleep in her own den. For now Swiftpaw was comfortable laying here with the kittens by her side. It was peaceful. So peaceful. Until the sounds of annoyed cats broke the silence of camp. Swiftpaw's eyes shot open as she realized she had dozed off. Carefully she crawled away from the kits, out from under the honeysuckle bush, and made her way over to the gathering party. She pushed past a few of her clanmates to settle beside Shadowpaw.

"What happened?"

"Treeclan's at it again," he hissed, tail lashing.

"Blazestar's still accusing us of trespassing. Even after Whitestar called out his warriors for crossing the border today," Rabbitpaw chimed in.

"They did that?" Swiftpaw gasped. She was missing out on so much being trapped here in camp. Rabbitpaw gave a nod.

"Wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it myself. I watched Gingerstrike tell off that Treeclan apprentice Magpiepaw before sending her scrambling back up a tree. She wasn't the only cat I saw, either. I think she was meant to be a distraction while the rest of her patrol came to mark their border further into the Forest Patch. We came home to tell Whitestar about it right after we'd chased them off. We didn't even give ourselves time to remark the boundary after scaring those tree lickers away."
Swiftpaw could hardly believe what she was hearing. Would Magpiepaw really pull something like that? She didn't know the molly that well but she had thought better of her. Now she wasn't so sure what to think. But if Blazestar had ordered Magpiepaw to act as a diversion then Swiftpaw could understand. A cat couldn't go against their leader after all, not over something like that.
Things were growing complicated now. Blazestar had his warriors cross and mark across the border; war had to be on the horizon now. *How foolish Whitestar must think he is*. The clan had to be ready to prepare for the inevitable. But even after that empowering speech from the day before, were they truly ready?

Chapter 21

[image]

"Swiftpaw! Swiftpaw! Swiftpaw!" mewled Tulipkit as she bounced around Swiftpaw's legs. The patched apprentice was too busy fixing the nursery's bedding to reply at the moment, allowing the two and a half moon old kit to pester her. Tulipkit kept calling, causing some of the queens and Rabbitpaw to groan.

"For Starclan's sake, would you answer her already?" Rosebloom snapped. Swiftpaw jolted, dropping a wad of wool she was holding. The white spotted molly had become increasingly aggressive in the past few days. It came to no surprise that she was acting this way. Between the discomfort of her terribly swollen belly and her grief for the loss of Ryestep, nobody could blame her for wanting to go undisturbed.
Rabbitpaw let out a snicker beside his mother Jaybird who softly chided him for doing so. Swiftpaw dipped her head, mumbling an apology before turning to Tulipkit.

"Yes?"

"Can you give me a tour around camp now? You were supposed to forever ago, but you forgot."

"I've been busy," Swiftpaw defended herself. "Between taking care of your denmates, and joining the occasional battle patrol, I've been up to my ears in things to do."

"Well you aren't really busy now!" Tulipkit puffed up her chest fur, pouting. Her brow was knit and her large green eyes focused on the apprentice."So can you show me around, please please *pleeease*?"
Swiftpaw let out a soft sigh, tucking the wad of wool back into the nest she had taken it from. She bent down to look the kitten in the eye. She could finish up changing the nursery's bedding later.

"Sure, bunny. Let's get started."

Tulipkit squealed with delight, standing beside Swiftpaw as she crawled from under the nursery and walked her around, showing her dens and introducing her to clanmembers. Rabbitpaw followed behind, keeping a couple tail-lengths of distance between them. Everyone seemed relieved at the sight of the strong, energetic kit. It brought them hope. Soon enough, Tulipkit and her littermates would be apprentices, able to aid in the battles against Treeclan. Starclan only knew they needed more cats to help in the fight. *Hopefully all of this will be over by then*, Swiftpaw wished, holding back a sigh.

"And as you already know, this is Tall Stone. In the crack on the side is where Whitestar sleeps," Swiftpaw meowed, concluding the tour.

"Wow really?" Tulipkit gasped, pelting over to the den. Before Swiftpaw or Rabbitpaw could warn her not to poke her head inside, the kit had already disappeared. A heartbeat later she came backing out with fur fluffed, Whitestar following her as well as Butterflytail. The tom exchanged a look with Grassclan's leader, brushing his tail along her back as he passed by to walked over to Tigerfang. Whitestar watched the tabby tom for a heartbeat before turning her attention onto Tulipkit. She gazed down at the kitten with interested blue eyes. Tulipkit crouched down on the ground, staring back up.

"I wasn't expecting more visitors," Whitestar noted, flicking her tail-tip with amusement. "But if the brave Tulipstar has come to my den, it must be for something important."
Immediately the kit relaxed, standing up.

"I have come to offer the assistance of Tulipclan in this fight against the evil Treeclan!" She proclaimed. Whitestar purred, bending down to rasp her tongue against the kit's cheek.

"Grassclan appreciates the offer, Tulipstar. But we can handle ourselves just fine. I'm sure you can watch out for them from your own territory."
Tulipkit nodded, prancing back over to the apprentices. Whitestar followed her.
"Swiftpaw, may I speak with you?"

Swiftpaw blinked. "Of course, Whitestar." The clan leader beckoned her into her den, disappearing inside. Swiftpaw asked Rabbitpaw to return Tulipkit to the nursery so she could be with her sisters. When they were gone, the white and black apprentice squeezed herself through the crack and into Tall Stone. She sat down a tail-length from the entrance, forcing the fur on her spine to lay flat. What could be so important that she had to come into the leader's den, she wondered nervously. Whitestar lifted a paw to groom as she spoke.

"Ashwhisker tells me you're doing a wonderful job with nursery duty," she began. "He especially appreciates the extra care you've put in with taking care of the kits and Rosebloom. 'What a flighty bee that apprentice is,' he said. Well done. After considering this, I have decided to allow you to return to your training early. *But,* you are still to take care of the queens between your duties, and you are still not allowed to attend this moon's gathering."
Swiftpaw jumped to her paws, nubby tail standing erect with joy.

"Thank you, Whitestar!" She purred, ducking her head. Excitement surged through the young molly's body, causing her limbs to tingle with a new found energy. Swiftpaw had been itching to get her paws out of the confines of camp, at long last she was free.

"Run along now. You should go find Chicorynose." Whitestar suggested, catching onto the elation in the apprentice's mew.

"I will!" Swiftpaw trilled, bursting from the den to search the camp for her mentor.

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Finally somewhere new! Swiftpaw felt relief wash over her. Chicorynose was leading the way towards Mountainclan's territory, Gingerstrike and Rabbitpaw bounding after them both at an even gate. Today, the apprentices would practice defense against ambush. Near the mountains were many rocks and places to hide, a perfect location to learn how to handle an opponent in a limited space.
Swiftpaw galloped alongside her fluffy fawn mentor, enjoying the cool breeze ruffling through her pelt the closer they drew to the

border. She was much more comfortable in an open area rather than under canopies like Treeclan were. She found herself appreciating the vast landscape of the territory even more now that she had been stuck in camp for almost a moon. She was also grateful that Chicorynose had felt it best that they practice on new terrain, rather than in the Forest Patch where they were at risk of interruption.

"Hey Chicorynose?" Swiftpaw called, turning her head to address her mentor.

"Yes Swiftpaw?" Chicorynose looked back at her.

"Do you think some of Treeclan's cats are so mean because they don't get to sun themselves enough?"
The Grassclan deputy fell quiet for a heartbeat before erupting into a *mrrow* of laughter.

"Between you and me I think its because they always have to sit on burrs and thorns," she confessed with a snicker.

"I bet it's seen as a right of passage for a cat to get one stuck to their rear!" Rabbitpaw chimed in with a hardy laugh. The rest of the patrol burst out in a fit out glee right along with him as they began to slow their pace. The grass was starting to thin as they came to a halt by a maze of rocks which towered over them; some only by a tail-length and others a bearlength high. Swiftpaw stared up in astonishment. She bet she could jump onto some of them if she had to.

"Alright, 'Paws, here's what we're going to do. I'm going to send you both to hide among the rocks together, and in a few heartbeats, Gingerstrike and I are going to find you. Kind of like hide and seek. Except when we find you, we're going to attack," Chicorynose explained. Swiftpaw nodded, looking ahead at labyrinth before her. Her mentor brushed her tail against her shoulders, motioning for her to head forward. Swiftpaw glanced at her, then towards her partner before wandering off, leading the way deep into the maze. She knew they wouldn't have to limit themselves on the distance they would travel, they weren't anywhere near the border. It felt good not having to worry about having an enemy to argue with just

for passing by. But Swiftpaw knew they had to keep vigilant. Chicorynose and Gingerstrike would be after the pair at any moment now, they needed to be ready. Swiftpaw hurried around, careful not to rub too closely to the rocks as she passed. She signed to Rabbitpaw about an idea she just came up with, warning him to not leave a scent trail for the warriors to follow. Nearby she had spotted a boulder with a dent big enough for two to hide in. With a jerk of her head she led the fluffy lynx point tom over to the place where they would await their pursuers. Here they would be decently hidden and it would be hard for their mentors to get the drop on them. Now all the partners had to do was wait. Swiftpaw parted her jaws, drawing air over her scent glands to see if she could catch any cat approaching. But she never caught whiff of anything. She turned her head to look at Rabbitpaw who acknowledged her silent question with a head shake.
A while passed, too long for Swiftpaw's liking. Was she that good at hiding? Cautiously she withdrew from the dent in the rock, whipping her head around. There was nobody around. Only the sound of the wind whistling through the rocks managed to disturb the overall stillness. Worry prickled Swiftpaw's pelt. Where was Chicorynose? Where was Gingerstrike? Just then, an unexpected weight came crashing down upon her, knocking the wind from her lungs. Swiftpaw gasped as she looked behind her to see what pressed on her spine.

"Chicorynose!" She breathed. But the she-cat did not look as pleased to see her like the young apprentice was. Chicorynose growled, grabbing Swiftpaw's scruff. She shook her, throwing the patched molly towards another rock. Swiftpaw flipped mid air to land perfectly on her paws. She stood up, whipped around, and arched her back. For a heartbeat she felt betrayed, but the feeling soon melted away. This was only practice, she reminded herself, Chicorynose was acting like an enemy to prepare her. Swiftpaw folded her ears back, letting out a battle cry as she headed towards her mentor. She leapt onto a smaller rock, using it to propel herself forward faster. She reached out for Chicorynose with outstretched forepaws, pushing into her shoulders to knock her down. But Chicorynose shook her away, twisting around to keep upright. She backed away, tail lashing violently.

"Grassclan scum," She snarled, the slightest hint of a smirk tugging at her lips. "Rockclan will never be beaten!"
Swiftpaw had to suppress a bubble of laughter lingering in her chest, releasing an amused purr instead. She shook out her pelt, getting into character.

"Grassclan attack!" She yowled as she lunged for the older she-cat once again. Rabbitpaw charged into the battle with her. He swiped at Chicorynose's face once, twice, three times but Chicorynose dodged every hit. Swiftpaw swept her paws in an attempt to trip the older molly up, yet the Grassclan deputy did not allow herself to be taken down so easily. She jumped back and up onto a rock, looming over the apprentices menacingly. Swiftpaw looked up at her, wiggling her nubby tail in frustration. A yowl sounded from behind them, snapping the apprentices' attention away. Gingerstrike came barreling over, leaping onto Rabbitpaw with a swiftness. He pummbled the younger cat beneath him, bringing Swiftpaw alarm. She ran forward, rushing to her partner's aid. But before she could reach the two tumbling toms, she was attacked. Chicorynose had landed on her back again, pressing all of her weight down onto Swiftpaw. Swiftpaw let out a shriek of surprise as she twisted around, flailing her paws and dealing the older she-cat fake painful blows-her claws were sheathed after all-that caused Chicorynose to jump back. She scrambled back onto a rock, leaping onto another, then another, plotting another arial strike on her apprentice. Swiftpaw waited for Chicorynose to try and leap onto her back again, an idea forming in her mind. The white and black patched molly shot forward as Chicorynose came to settle back on the ground. She dropped low and whipped around, swinging a back forepaw to knock Chicorynose's feet from under her. Chicorynose buckled on the pebble littered floor with a thud, giving Swiftpaw ample time to scale a rock and claim the high ground. She gazed down at Grassclan's deputy, watching her rise to her paws. *If I jump down now she'll swat me away like a fly. But if I try to be more unpredictable...* Swiftpaw suddenly turned tail, hopping up onto another rock. Then another and another and another. She found them incredibly easy to scale across, far easier than originally anticipated. *It's just like walking the fence posts in Twolegplace!*
"Rabbitpaw, climb!" She commanded, looking back momentarily. Rabbitpaw had managed to slip away from Gingerstrike, following

his partner's orders. He scurried across the stones with almost as much grace and ease as she had-much to Swiftpaw's surprise-until the pair finally caught up with each other. They had gained some distance between themselves and their mentors now, glancing back in their direction. Chicorynose bounded after them from the ground, trying to keep up on the uneven path below her paws. Gingerstrike pursued them from atop the rocks, gaining on them quickly. Out of nowhere, Rabbitpaw turned back to swipe at the ruddy ginger tom as he caught up, smacking him off of the rock he was perched on. The lynx point tom leapt down after him, engaging in another brawl with the young warrior on the stony earth below. Chicorynose had come to climb up onto the rocks while Swiftpaw had been distracted watching Rabbitpaw fight. She turned, coming face to face with her, swiping at Chicorynose with a paw. She landed a hit square on the deputy's muzzle, causing her to slip. Chicorynose landed on her paws, shaking dust from her fluffy ruffled pelt. Her eyes blazed as she glared up at her apprentice, sending the younger she-cat scrambling away yet again. The chase was on. When they reached a more open area, Swiftpaw gracefully dove down from her rocky path. She waited for Chicorynose to charge towards her then instinctively rolled onto her back, kicking up at the deputy's belly. Chicorynose yelped in surprised, landing in a crouch on the opposite side of her original position. Swiftpaw rolled back onto her paws, running towards Chicorynose. She jumped onto her back, pretending to claw her. Chicorynose tried to roll to kick Swiftpaw off, but Swiftpaw kept her hold on her. She grabbed the deputy's scruff between her teeth, pressing a paw to her head and another to her chest. Chicorynose went limp beneath her. Her eyes stared widely at the scene unfolding a bearlength away. Gingerstrike too had been defeated, pressed to the floor under his apprentice's behind.

"Rockclan retreat!" Chicorynose cried. "Oh woe is me, we have been slain!"
Swiftpaw erupted into a purr of laughter, jumping back and sitting a tail-length away.
"Great job, Swift," Chicorynose praised as she sat up, giving her fluffy chest fur a few licks. She looked towards Gingerstrike and Rabbitpaw as they padded over to join them. "And you too, Rabbitpaw. You worked well defending yourselves, as well as each

other against the attack. I knew you would make good partners."

"You're both learning quickly, keep up the good work," Gingerstrike chimed.
A purr escaped Swiftpaw as she felt herself glow with pride. She licked her shoulder fur, trying to tone the feeling down a little. Chickorynose came to rasp her tongue between her ears rewarding.

"Let's get out of here now. I don't know about you three, but my paws are killing me from walking on all those pebbles. "

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The path towards home felt strangely longer than before. Gingerstrike and Rabbitpaw had split up from the patrol to do some hunting while the she-cats decided to head back to camp. Swiftpaw glanced around as she noticed the meadow's soft green grass merge and change into tall golden stalks of a plant she did not recognize. They towered above them as the pair pressed forward in the direction of what Swiftpaw assumed was home. But she found her surrounding unfamiliar to her now. She hasn't remembered this from before.

"Chicorynose, where are we?" Swiftpaw's mew quivered with nervousness as she stalked closer to the older she-cat.

"The wheat field. We need to stop by the farm and pick up some wool before heading back to camp," Chicorynose explained, tail held high. Swiftpaw recalled hearing her denmates talk about the farm. It was home to many strange creatures she had only ever seen on the moving vision box in her Twoleg's den. Cows, horses, chickens, pigs, and sheep. Each described to be strange and humongous; all except for chickens which matched the size of pheasants. She was interested to see that.

"Watch out!" Chicorynose suddenly yowled, grabbing Swiftpaw by the scruff and throwing her back. Swiftpaw shrieked in surprise as she was met by her mentor who crouched low in the wheat beside her. A thundering roar assaulted their eardrums, shaking Swiftpaw to her core. The ground began to tremble beneath them as the noise grew louder and louder, until the beast who made the startling

sound emerged from the field. It was as tall as a tree, and wide as two bears, with sleek shining skin as red as a cardinal's wings. On the very top Swiftpaw could barely make out the shape of a Twoleg perched on its back, probably telling the beast what to do. Its eyes glowed harsh and yellow like the morning sun and released enough fumes to shelter itself in a fog. Swiftpaw's eyes watered and throat tightened as the smog assaulted her airway. She coughed and gagged as the monster passed by and lumbered away, far out of sight.

"What was that?!" She asked hoarsely, letting out another wheeze once the air had cleared. Chicorynose stood on her paws, watching in the direction the creature had left. Without a word she urged her apprentice to follow her forward with a double flick of her ears. The two she-cats walked a few bear lengths away before the older molly finally spoke.

"That was a farm monster. Twolegs ride them to tear down the wheat. They don't purposely hunt cats, but they'll happily eat one if they get in the way."
Swiftpaw could only imagine what it would be like if farm monsters actually hunted cats as prey. She shivered at the thought.
"We'll be safe in the barn though, come on." Chicorynose led the way into a red Twoleg den with a reek that was indescribable. It wasn't like death scent, but it wasn't like normal animal dirt either. It smelled far more foul. Swiftpaw tiptoed across the hay covered floor cautiously as she gazed around. Strange animal sounds met her ears. A whinny made her jump, bringing her closer to her mentor. Chicorynose laughed.

"Don't be too frightened, it's only a foal!" Yowled a cat. The two mollies whipped their heads around to see a pure white tom strutting across a gate post. His fluffy black tail was kinked over his back in greetings.
"Hi there! The name's Mako, y'know like the shark?"
The two Grassclan cats exchanged a look before looking back at the overly friendly tom.

"Greetings. I hadn't realized a cat moved into the barn, we're sorry for intruding," mewed Chicorynose, ducking her head. Mako leaped down into a pile of hay, prancing over to them. A warm smile was

set on his face.

"Nah, it's all good. So where you from? What brings you here?"

"We're from Grassclan, a group of cats that live out on the meadow. We're here to collect some wool." Chicorynose showed no signs of hostility towards the strange tom as she spoke, which Swiftpaw found to be odd. The farm was part of Grassclan's territory, shouldn't they be chasing him off? She shot her younger companion a glance, silently telling her to ease the tension she didn't realize she had. The tom wasn't threatening, there was no reason for Swiftpaw to become prickly. But she couldn't help being guarded.

"Well go ahead and help yourselves. Don't let me interrupt your usual routine."
Chicorynose purred, swishing her tail with gratitude.

"Thank you. We won't be here too long." She began to pad off, tail held high.

"Aw, stay as long as you'd like. Are you guys hungry? There's plenty of mice in here for you to eat if you are. You can help yourselves to those too."
Swiftpaw parted her jaws to taste the air. Through the musky animal scent she was surprised that she was able to catch the sweet smell of mouse entangled within. She looked at her mentor, seeking approval. Chicorynose shook her head.

"Thank you for the offer, but I don't think we'll have room in our jaws to carry both prey and wool." The fawn she-cat motioned for Swiftpaw to follow after her.

"Suit yourself." Mako gave a shrug before following behind, jumping up onto another gate and up a wooden beam. Swiftpaw tilted her head back to see the tom leaping across beam to beam above their heads, watching them with interest. Nervous, she drew herself closer to Chicorynose, signing her concerns in what little of the Silent Language she knew. Chicorynose gave a glance at the cat above, resting her tail on her apprentice's shoulder reassuringly. A bleat caught their attention as they crossed the threshold from the hay covered ground onto flat stone. Swiftpaw recognized the new

smell that came to greet her as they headed further into this strange new area of the barn. She knew it from her den, she knew it from when she'd sleep. It was the same scent the wool which made up her nest held. Before them stood a herd of tall creatures with fur that resembled the clouds in the sky. Hooves clacked against the stone as the creatures moved around. At random they would call out, as if they were speaking to one another.

"Are these sheep?" Swiftpaw asked. Chicorynose looked at her, giving a nod. She stepped forward, pulling a wad of soft white material from a corner by the wall of the barn. Wool.

"Come get some, the sheep won't harm you."
Swiftpaw wiggled her tail, coming forward to grab as much wool as she knew she could carry. She rolled it all together before taking it into her mouth. Chicorynose did the same with a pile of her own. She signed to Swiftpaw, calling her back home. The two turned around and dragged their wool through the barn, Mako following them back to the entrance from the rafters. He meowed a farewell as the Grassclan she-cats made it back out into the wheat field, disappearing into the long golden stalks.

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As the two scaled up the hill which led into camp, a ruckus could be heard erupting from the summit. As they pushed their way past the bramble barrier the pair noticed a crowd forming around one of the dens. They dropped off their wool in the medicine cat's den before going to join the crowd.
A shrill yowl rang out as they drew closer. As Swiftpaw pushed her way past her clanmates she could make out the pelt of Jaybird standing protectively in front of the nursery. *Rosebloom must be having her kits.* Whispers from her clanmates told her the spotted queen had been kitting for some time now. Two kits had been confirmed alive, and more were on the way.
As the yowling died down, someone pushed Jaybird out of the way. It was Snowfrost, followed by a proud looking Mistypaw. The older medicine cat came to stand beside Whitestar who had been sitting at the front of the crowd. They chatted for a moment before the clan leader announced:

"Rosebloom has given birth to three healthy kits. Two mollykits and a tom."
Hearing the news, the clan broke out into a cheer. They meowed congratulations through the den's branches so that the queen could hear them from outside. As cats began to walk away, Swiftpaw made her way to the mouth of the den. When she peered inside she could see Rosebloom's shape curled around three tiny balls of fuzz. Ashwhisker sat at her head, rasping his tongue against it slowly. Goldensong hovered above them, checking on each kit and finally the new mother herself. Swiftpaw watched her feed the queen some herbs before crawling out from under the honeysuckle bush. Swiftpaw dipped her head respectfully as Goldensong passed by to meet with her denmates a bear length away. Mistypaw trilled, kneading the grass beneath her paws. Her eyes sparkled as she highlighted moments from the kitting. *She finally got a chance to help.* Swiftpaw purred. She knew how excited Mistypaw was to help Rosebloom through her kitting, she could only imagine how thrilled she had felt when she witnessed the miracle of birth for the first time. She made a mental note to have the silver she-cat talk about it later. Swiftpaw turned her attention back towards the new family now. A chilly breeze ruffled her pelt, as if something had just brushed past her. A small shaft of light trickled through the branches of the honeysuckle bush down onto Rosebloom. From it, the patched apprentice could make out the shape of a cat hovering above her, its greyish brown pelt sparkling with what looked like starlight. Swiftpaw gave her head a shake before looking back into the den. The figure had disappeared. Had she been seeing things? Or had that been Ryestep's spirit coming to see his kits? She did not know, but she truly hoped it was. A bit bewildered, Swiftpaw pulled herself towards the apprentice's den for a well deserved nap. Hope filled her heart as she settled into her nest. Seeing that happy little family joined together brought her peace. Though things weren't perfect right now, Swiftpaw was sure that everything was going to turn out alright.

Chapter 22

[image]

Another moon had gone by, with tensions growing high. Another gathering just past the day before, and once again Blazestar denied any wrongdoings on his clan's part. But it was obvious that Treeclan was wrong this time. Multiple cats had been caught trying to push back the border and hunting prey much farther in the Forest Patch than they were allowed. Swiftpaw was in disbelief until she saw it happen with her own eyes.
Another cloudy day greeted her as she emerged from the apprentice's den earlier than usual. A nightmare had roused her just as the dawn patrols were being organized.

"Gingerstrike, you'll be taking a patrol to the Forest Patch," Chicorynose announced from atop Tall Stone. Her eyes scanned the cats who were left in camp. "Butterflytail, Rabbitpaw and Swiftpaw will go with you."
A patrol? Cool! It had been a while since Swiftpaw had gone on dawn patrol. She felt grateful for the opportunity, and it would help rid her mind of those nasty dreams.
The four Grassclan cats made their way into the maze of oak trees that had become a common battleground, ears pricked and awareness raised as they reached the end of their territory. As Swiftpaw turned to mark one of the trees, a gleaming grey pelt caught her eye. In the distance, two Treeclan cats made their way to the ground, scaling their claws down the length of a few nearby oaks. Only they were doing so on the wrong side of the border. Alarmed, Swiftpaw's pelt pricked. She made her way to her clanmates, flicking her ears back and flexing her claws in and out twice, giving the sign for intruders.

"How many?" Gingerstrike signed back. Swiftpaw flicked an ear twice. At once the two warriors nodded, leaving Swiftpaw and Rabbitpaw on their own.

"Let's create a diversion," Rabbitpaw suggested. "We can yell at

those nasty sap sippers while Butterflytail and Gingerstrike get the jump on them."
Swiftpaw nodded, lowering her head. Side by side the apprentices stalked, their hackles rising as they came to stand before the Treeclan warriors.

"Hey! What are you doing on Grassclan territory?" Swiftpaw yowled, wiggling her tail. Robinspots stopped clawing a tree while Greytuft turned to face the two of them. She let out a throaty chuckle, unsheathing her claws.

"*Your* territory?" She snarled, "The forest belongs to Treeclan. We're simply marking our borders."

"You're far from the border, fleabag, the scent markers start back that way," Rabbitpaw growled, flicking his tail in the proper direction. Robinspots smirked.

"Not anymore."

"That's what you think!" Swiftpaw spat just as Gingerstrike and Butterflytail leapt out of the undergrowth. Each warrior took down another, letting out their battle cries as they sunk their claws into their wood scented pelts. Gingerstrike threw Greytuft to the wayside, joining Butterflytail in a fight against Robinspots. Greytuft let out a cough as the dust cleared around her. She turned to flee the scene, to possibly get help, but was apprehended by the onlooking Grassclan appreciates. Rabbitpaw jumped onto her, holding her still with all of his weight while Swiftpaw slipped to claw at her soft underbelly. Greytuft thrashed, trying to throw the apprentices away from her with little success.

"This will teach you for putting your claws where they don't belong!" Rabbitpaw yowled, sinking his teeth into the back of the grey warrior's neck. Swiftpaw slid out from under her, grasping her tail between her teeth. She pulled on it, making Greytuft shriek.

"You rotten furballs!" She cried. Rabbitpaw released his grip to stand on top of her, pushing on Greytuft until she lay on the ground, defeated.

"Get off of our territory, *now*," he snarled in her ear, letting her go. Greytuft jumped to her paws, turning her gaze from one apprentice to another. Swiftpaw let out a fearsome hiss while Rabbitpaw swung his claws at her threateningly. Greytuft thrashed her tail, turning to climb up a tree. But Swiftpaw wasn't willing to allow her to take the high ground. She lashed out, chasing the grey warrior away. She ran to another tree, but Swiftpaw denied her from climbing. She continued to do this until Greytuft had made it past the border. As a last act of assertiveness, Swiftpaw turned and marked the nearest tree, a smug smirk on her face. Defeated at last, Greytuft fled back into the depts of Treeclan's land. Soon after, Swiftpaw noticed Robinspots pelting after her, pursued by Gingerstrike.

"And stay out!" He roared, fur bristling like flames as he came to a halt by the scent markers. Rabbitpaw laughed triumphantly, coming to stand beside his mentor. He tilted his head back, caterwauling his victory. Swiftpaw joined him, a connection sparking between them.

"Alright that's enough you two. Let's report back to Whitestar," Butterflytail chuckled, flicking his tail to motion for his clanmates to follow. Rabbitpaw came to walk by his side, the two disappearing into woods. Swiftpaw waited beside Gingerstrike, noticing a long scratch across his flank. She was worried for him, afraid to leave his side.

"Go on ahead, Swiftpaw, I'll catch up with you soon," he promised, glancing around, mainly towards the treetops. Was he worried about more trespassers?

"I'm not leaving," Swiftpaw meowed stubbornly. Gingerstrike sighed through his nose, nudging her with his muzzle gently. He looked desperate to have her leave, but Swiftpaw was being adamant. She wasn't going to leave a clanmate alone so close to the Treeclan border.

"Gingerstrike?" A voice piped from above. Swiftpaw tilted her head back, peering into the trees. In the branches she spotted the white patched pelt of a cat. Another Treeclan warrior?

"You need to go now, Swiftpaw," Gingerstrike insisted, shouldering her away this time.

"Who's up there?" She growled, wiggling her tail. Magpiepaw came climbing down the bark of the tree, her eyes wide with guilt. What was going on? Gingerstrike came to stand before her, bumping his forehead affectionately against hers before coming to stand protectively between the two apprentices.

"Relax, Magpiepaw's a friend," Gingerstrike meowed defensively.

"I know she's a friend," Swiftpaw responded, the fur along her spine rising. "She's *my* friend. But why is she on Grassclan territory?"

"She's my friend too. We wanted to spend time together." The ruddy ginger tom lowered his ears a little with guilt.

"We were going to meet at the Gathering Clearing, but then I saw a patrol heading into your territory and I followed them to warn Gingerstrike," Magpiepaw explained. "It's my fault that they've started pressing the border in the first place. I ended up over the scent markers by accident the first time, and the patrol I was with decided that I had come up with a brilliant idea..." She let out a sigh, stepping closer to Gingerstrike. "I feel awful for causing such a mess. And for my clanmates following me here to start trouble. " Magpiepaw dipper her head, pressing it against Gingerstrike's shoulder. The ruddy ginger tom turned to lick her between the ears, purring softly. Sympathy churned in Swiftpaw's belly as she watched them. Perhaps originally Magpiepaw had come to start trouble, but now all she wanted to do was be with Gingerstrike. Despite the impending war, the two of them had managed to form a bond.

"I'll keep your secret safe," Swiftpaw promised begrudgingly, holding back a sigh. "So long as next time, you don't come back to this side of the forest, Magpiepaw."
Surprised, the pair let out soft trills of appreciation, standing beside each other with tails raised. The two said their farewells before Gingerstrike turned to follow Swiftpaw home. As they departed, Magpiepaw disappeared back into the trees, a goodbye echoing on the wind.

Seeing the two enemy cats come together gave Swiftpaw hope. Hope that things would be alright, that things would finally settle down. That Treeclan and Grassclan could come to find peace settle between them once more.

That was half a moon ago now, and tensions had all but died down. Now, things were becoming far more violent.
Swiftpaw sat by the mouth of the medicine den, helping Mistypaw sort some of her herbs while the older medicine cats had left to aid a patrol in a raid.

"Is this tansy?" She asked, picking up a small yellow blossom with a claw. Mistypaw shook her head.

"No that's tormentil, we'll be using that on deep wounds soon, I'm sure."

"The warriors are returning!" Cheered Cricketsong as today's battle patrol made their way into the clearing. Mistypaw stood at attention, darting over to the injured party. She cooed at the first warrior to break through the bramble tunnel, leading them over to her den. More cats came streaming in after with varying degrees of battle wounds. The worst of them all was Butterflytail who had to be dragged in by both Snowfrost and Goldensong. He withered in pain as they set him down in the middle of camp. His body wriggled against the earth, his jaws parted in an inaudible cry of agony. Swiftpaw cautiously approched him, a pit forming in her stomach. She had never seen a cat act like this before. Butterflytail stretched his forepaws outward, kneading at the air with unsheathed claws. He gurgled as he struggled for breath, struggled to beg for help. Whitestar came to witness the scene, staring with mouth half agape in shock. Cricketsong and Chicorynose came to flank either side of her, burying their muzzles into her creamy fur comfortingly. Tigerfang came around to obstruct the leader's view while the two she-cats led her away.

"What happened?!" Mistypaw gasped, looking down at the tom in horror as she approched. Swiftpaw wanted to jump in front of her and shield her from the sight, but resisted. She knew that she needed to see this. It was her job to.

"He was thrown into a tree head first. His brain must be badly damaged," Snowfrost responded, sounding rather collected.

"Wh..what can we do?" Mistypaw asked in a shaky voice, eyes wide with fear.

Snowfrost shook her head. "We can do nothing. There is no cure for severe head trauma like this. He will either break from his trance on his own, or die."
That didn't seem very logical. *Why would banging your head cause such a terrible fit?* Concerned, Swiftpaw went to speak with Dewstone. The white and silver she-cat was seated near the warrior's den, watching the scene of pain in front of her attentively.

"Dewstone," Swiftpaw mewed, breaking the Code Keeper from her thoughts. "Have you seen Butterflytail?"

"It's hard to keep an eye on everyone from this distance. Why, what's going on?"

"He's spasming. Snowfrost says it's because he hit a tree. Is that right? Can that really happen...?"
Dewstone curled her tail as she thought briefly, slowly nodding her head.

"It really depends on how hard Butterflytail hit his head, but yes. It's rare, but it can happen."
Oh, Swiftpaw felt sick. Another warrior was on the verge of dying. Dying because of the actions of a Treeclan warrior. All the hope that had once stirred inside of her leaked out like water flowing through the cracks of a broken boulder. What would Whitestar do now?

"All cats gather beneath Tall Stone!" Whitestar yowled untraditionally. Those of the clan that were not being seen by the medicine cats edged their way toward the towering ancient boulder. Swiftpaw examined those in attendance, noticing the tension built up in everyone's pelts. Frostpaw sat with a paw raised, rubbing it against a cut on her cheek while Quailpaw sat at her side, licking the blood from a wound on the back of her neck. Ambereye laid beneath her younger brother Gingerstrike who cleaned the top of

her head, a sad chuckle escaping him. Cricketsong sat at Chicorynose's side by Tall Stone's base, a distressed mewl rising from her throat as she furiously cleaned a nasty wound over the deputy's eye. Mistypaw twisted around those who had yet to be seen, patching their scratches and bite wounds with cobwebs and marigold. It was shocking. Swiftpaw had never seen the clan in such pain and distress. Whitestar waited for silence to fall over her cats before she finally spoke up.
"Who started the battle with Treeclan?" She asked, her usually soft, soothing voice now laced with ice. Cats exchanged glances with one another, a discussion rising from beneath. Was Whitestar accusing her own clan of starting today's battle?
"Well?"

"W...we did.." Piped Snailear, guilt written on his face. A few shocked gasps escaped the cats around him, including one from Swiftpaw. Slugsnout and Beetlepatch hissed at the tom-their own littermate-to be quiet. But it was clear that the ginger and white tom was eager to confess, to possibly ease the punishment he may face if Whitestar were to find out from someone else instead.
"Slugsnout, Beetlepatch, and I started the scuffle. We wanted to give Treeclan a taste of their own medicine....we ambushed their sunhigh patrol, then sent Beetlepatch back home to fetch help. We wanted to make it look like they had attacked us first, and lured them across the border before the battle patrol arrived."

"Why would you do this?" Dewstone asked, standing up to make her way to the front of the crowd.

"Like I said, we wanted them to have a taste of their own medicine. We're so sick of being attacked. So, we decided that this time we would pounce first."
Whitestar heaved a sigh, dipping her head. She seemed to be suppressing a growl that was threatening to erupt from her throat. Only when she had regained her composure did the siamese she-cat speak.

"I am very disappointed in you three. Senior warriors... I thought better of you. When I return from apologizing to Blazestar, I will punish you accordingly. For now, get all the rest you can. You'll need it."

The three toms shrank back, bowing respectfully.

"Apologize?" Tornface caterwauled unexpectedly. "You're going to apologize to that mange-pelted leader after all his clan has done to us?"
Yowls from the rest of Grassclan joined the old tom in his outcry.

"It's the right thing to do. Even if Blazestar will not do the same, I must do what I can to prevent a war."

"But Treeclan killed Waspwing!" Beetlepatch countered.

"We don't know tha-" Whitestar tried to defend her choice, being cut off by Tigerfang.

"And now Butterflytail is dying because of them." The tabby tom held his mate's gaze for a few heartbeats, engaging in a silent battle with her. Whitestar averted her eyes, addressing the clan once more.

"Butterflytail is dying because of the actions members of *our* clan took first. We cannot rightfully blame Treeclan for anything except trespassing. I will go apologize to Blazestar, even if he does not deserve to hear it. I fear that if I don't, he will surely declare war."
The siamese she-cat leapt down from Tall Stone, swiftly concluding the meeting. She was clearly in no mood to indulge in any further argument on the subject as she stalked towards the camp barrier.
"Tigerfang, Swiftpaw, and Chicorynose to me. You three will accompany me to Treeclan's camp. Dewstone, you will be in charge until we return."

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Swiftpaw felt uneasy as they walked past the scent markers, further into the forest than she ever would have liked. A horrible stench caught in her nose as the trees began to thin slightly. The smell was oddly familiar and yet difficult to place. As the path cleared a wide black river stretched out before them, seeming to continue on in either direction forever. Cautiously, Swiftpaw reached out a paw to swipe at the black liquid within. To her amazement the surface was actually solid stone. As she went to take a brave step out on the

stony path, the ground began to shake. Whitestar grabbed Swiftpaw's scruff and threw her back just as a creature raced by, roaring and kicking out fumes. A monster! Swiftpaw had only seen a pawful of them back when she was a kittypet. She'd almost forgotten what they'd looked like, and how dangerous they could be. Though she had never seen them travel on a path quite like this. Back in her neighborhood, the paths had been made of earth, not solid stone.

"This is the Thunder Path, Swiftpaw," Tigerfang explained, seeing the bewilderment on her face. "When the next monster passes we'll hurry to the other side." The tabby tom flicked his amber gaze onto the black stone path ahead. Another monster sped past, leaving behind a cloud of smog.
"Ready? Go!"
The four cats pelted across the Thunder Path as fast as their long limbs could carry them. They skidded to a halt as their paws touched the soft grass on the opposite bank. For a few heartbeats they sat panting, catching their breaths before continuing onward. But they did not make it far before a patrol jumped down on them. Four Treeclan warriors stood before them, fur bristling as they stared the intruders down.

"Whitestar?" A blue eyed ginger she-cat mewed, intrigued. "What do you think you're doing on Treeclan territory?"

"After a battle no less," spat a blue-grey tom. Whitestar seemed unaffected by the harshness in the tom's tone, swishing her tail.

"I have come to speak with Blazestar. Please, will you escort us to your camp?"
The warriors exchanged unpleasant glances before reluctantly nodding, herding the Grassclan patrol in the direction of Treeclan's camp.
As they scaled down a small elm tree into a leaf littered clearing, a whole new cluster of trees surrounded them, giving shelter to all the cats who lives there. Swiftpaw saw some warriors disappear into a hole high up in an oak halfway across the camp. Kits and queens scurried in and out from beneath the roots of a maple tree, playing and laughing without a care in the world. Injured cats limped from beneath the sagging branches of a weeping willow, a

calico she-cat looking on glumly. Sitting near a thick stump were Blazestar and another warrior Swiftpaw quickly recognized. *Wolfheart.* Whitestar led her patrol over, drawing the ginger and white tom's attention onto them. Blazestar's fur bristled as he parted his jaws to speak.

"What do you think you're doing here?" He growled lowly. Wolfheart stood at his side, baring his fangs at Tigerfang and Chicorynose. Swiftpaw looked at the large tom from her mentor's side with sadness. Wolfheart had been so nice before, why was he acting so hostile now?

"I'd like a word with you in your den, if that's alright," Whitestar replied, her voice soft. For a heartbeat Blazestar remained silent before jerking his head in the direction of his den. He slipped under the thick stump he had been sitting by, Whitestar following right behind. Before disappearing she instructed her cats to stay put. Tigerfang and Chicorynose busied themselves by whispering to one another while Swiftpaw trained her ears on the conversation in the leader's den. She could hear Blazestar yowling, asking what the intrusion was all about. Whitestar made sure to keep her voice calm and steady as she explained herself, and explained the actions of the cats who had caused today's battle. As she did so Blazestar seemed to settle down, his voice falling soft and harder to hear. For a long while the two spoke in hushed tones. Swiftpaw struggled to catch what they were saying, unknowingly moving herself closer to the tree stump.

"Get away from the Great Stump," Wolfheart hissed lowly, causing Swiftpaw to jolt. She scrambled backwards, back to her mentor's side.

"S..sorry..." She meeped, lowing her ears. Chicorynose shook her head, rasping her tongue against her apprentice's cheek with an amused purr.

"Nosy, 'Paw," she teased. Swiftpaw's pelt felt hot with embarrassment. She glanced at the fawn she-cat who simply kept grooming her. Tigerfang sat at her side, turning his attention to the Great Stump. A heartbeat later, the leaders emerged. Neither seemed to show any tension as they came to settle just outside the

den.

"Thank you for your visit, Whitestar. I trust that you will send your cats here to be punished accordingly. In return I will have Cardinaltail find who is responsible for the injury of your warrior. And I promise to keep my cats off your land," Blazestar meowed. It sounded as if the two leaders had discussed this already, but needed more cats to bare witness to the truce. Chicorynose, Tigerfang, Swiftpaw, and Wolfheart watched as the leaders touched noses.

"You have the thanks of my clan, Blazestar. Thank you for hearing me out. May the winds be on your side."

Blazestar dipped his head. "And may Starclan light your path." Whitestar mimicked his motion before turning and calling her cats to her side with a quick flick of her tail. Chicorynose and Tigerfang quickly ducked their heads in the presence of Blazestar before following, Swiftpaw doing the same. She galloped to catch up to her clanmates as they scaled the short elm and out of Treeclan's camp.

Chapter 23

[image]

The days seemed to come and go. Leaves grew on the tops of trees and the meadow grass grew tall and bright. The intense rays of the sun heated the land, welcoming in a sweltering Greenleaf. Cats went about their normal lives, gossiping, hunting, training. An occasional scuffle would still break out at the Treeclan border, but otherwise peace reigned once more. Though Grassclan remained wary of traveling in the Forest Patch.
Greenleaf was usually the time the clan would hunt in that area more. Prey and cats alike were more inclined to take shelter in the shade of the trees in this season. The sun beat down too harshly on the meadow, making it uncomfortable to spend time there in the hotter parts of the day. But cautious, Whitestar ordered patrols to spend less time in the woods. Cats were only to go there now to check the border and to train apprentices. The clan began to rely more on other parts of the territory for food. On the rare visits to the Forest Patch, apprentices trained to be mindful of their surroundings above. Soon, the bitterness between Grassclan and Treeclan melted away.
As more time passed on, the leaves began to change, then fall. Just as the rivalry simmered down, the meadow cooled just as quick. The sun weakened as more time moved away from the near war with Treeclan. Grassclan was not only surviving, but thriving. And now with Leaf-Fall on its way, cats were busier than ever preparing for the colder seasons ahead.

"Let all cats old enough to run across the meadow, gather here beneath the Tall Stone for a clan meeting," called Whitestar, excitement in her tone. The sun shone down on her back, casting her creamy fur ablaze with white light. Below her, her clan gathered, a murmur rising from the crowd. Swiftpaw sat herself beside Mistypaw near the medicine cat's den. She looked up at her leader with curiosity, what was today's meeting about? Shadowpaw came to sit on her other side, a charming smile on his face. They exchanged a quick glance before looking into the crowd. Cats

gathered in the clearing parted to allow Cricketsong and her litter through. The four kits had gotten so big in the past few moons and Swiftpaw's heart swelled knowing that she was there to watch them grow.

"Today is a special day in a young cat's life, where a kit leaves the nursery and joins the world as an apprentice. Cricketsong, have your kits reached 6 moons old? And do you believe they are ready to join us and learn the ways of the clan?"

"Yes, and I do," meowed Cricketsong, lifting her chin proudly. Whitestar blinked at her slowly, her smile never faltering.

"Are you ready to rejoin your peers as a warrior once more, or would you like to reside as a queen permanently?"

"I am happy as a queen, Whitestar. This is the job I would like to continue pursuing."

"Very well. Then with Starclan as witness, let it be known that this cat shall remain as a permanent queen of Grassclan."
Cricketsong let out a loud purr of appreciation, turning to give each of her babies one last lick before leaving to sit beside Cowpatch. Whitestar beckoned the kits forward with a swish her tail. The four padded forward slowly, heads held high and proud smiles settled on their faces. They came to a stop just a fox-length from Tall Stone's base, eager to be named. Excitement prickled Swiftpaw's pelt as she looked on at the sisters. They were finally going to be apprenticed! Nearby, the white and black patched molly could hear the delighted murmurs of her clanmates. Slugsnout and Snailear wondered between themselves which of them would be made a mentor. Ladybugbite eyed the kits curiously as she sat tall next to Dewstone who casually groomed her shoulder fur. Ambereye and Gingerstrike joked quietly with one another just as Whitestar properly began the ceremony.

"You have survived the first 6 moons of your lives. May Starclan guide your paws from this moment on," Whitestar mewed down at kittens. She turned her muzzle to the sky, her eyes searching the endless blue above.
"From this day forward, until they have earned their warrior names,

these apprentices shall be known as the following: Nectarkit, from this day forward you shall be known as Nectarpaw. Ladybugbite, its time you had your first apprentice. Teach this young cat everything you have learned from Chicorynose."

Swiftpaw pricked her ears. Ladybugbite had been Chicorynose's last apprentice? She hadn't known that she shared a mentor with the young calico warrior. Swiftpaw cast a glance toward the fawn she-cat. She wondered how many other cats Chicorynose had trained. She made a mental note to ask about it later.
Ladybugbite stepped out of the crowd, coming to stand before the brown and white tabby apprentice. Her amber eyes rested on her, tail curling with delight. But her expression shone stern, and for a heartbeat Swiftpaw was worried Ladybugbite would be too tough on the younger molly.

"Hey there, bunny. I'm going to turn you into the greatest fighter Grassclan's ever seen," she promised with a smirk. Nectarpaw's eyes lit up with enthusiasm as she stepped up to press her nose to her mentor's. United, the two she-cats padded back into the crowd. Whitestar looked on in approval before continuing.

"Pollenkit, from this day forward you shall be known as Pollenpaw. Snailear, you are ready to take on another apprentice. You taught Waspwing well, and I trust that you will do the same with Pollenpaw."

Snailear was the next to come from the herd of warriors, flicking his brother's ear playfully with his tail-tip as he passed. His mismatched eyes turned to look at his leader. Swiftpaw wondered if her words had hurt him somehow. Though it had been a few moons since Waspwing's passing, the reality of it must have still been hard for his former mentor to handle. Despite this, the white and ginger patched tom did not hesitate to touch noses with his new apprentice.

"Lilackit, from this day forward you shall be known as Lilacpaw. Slugsnout, you too are ready for another apprentice. Ambereye has blossomed into a wonderful warrior thanks to you, and I expect the same to happen with young Lilacpaw."
Slugsnout slithered from his place to meet with Lilacpaw.

Ambereye, who sat nearby, smiled at the white and fawn patched molly encouragingly. *She must approve of Slugsnout's new student,* Swiftpaw thought with amusement. She was curious if some of the molly's humor and confidence came from him, and if the same would rub off on Lilacpaw with time. Whitestar watched with the same amused glint in her eye. Finally, she settled her soft blue gaze upon the final kit of Cricketsong's litter.
"And lastly, Tulipkit. From this day forward you shall be known as Tulippaw. Ambereye, I believe you're ready for an apprentice. Teach this young cat everything there is to know about being a great warrior."
From the crowd came the amber she-cat herself, her pelt shimmering in the sunshine. She pranced up to Tulippaw who halfheartedly touched noses with her, a tiny grin on her face. Tulippaw, although smiling, did not seem very thrilled with the choice for her mentor. Claws of jealousy suddenly gripped Swiftpaw's belly. For a while now she had hoped Tulippaw would be *her* apprentice. But alas, she was still an apprentice herself. At least now she'd get to see the younger molly more often.

"Nectarpaw! Pollenpaw! Lilacpaw! Tulippaw!" Chicorynose cried out with glee, the joy for her kin unmistakable. Swiftpaw and the rest of the clan caterwauled the new apprentices' names with her a heartbeat later.
With the ceremony completed, Whitestar was led down from Tall Stone by Tigerfang, his tabby body pressed closely to hers to help the exhausted clan leader back to her den. Mewls of joy erupted from the crack as the mates disappeared inside. Almost two moons ago Whitestar had given birth to a litter of two, sired by Butterflytail. A tomkit and a mollykit. The care of her kits, though a joy, also left the leader feeling drained a lot of the time. But no cat had ever seen Whitestar so happy. The birth of her litter had ushered in a new era of tranquility among the clan.
Besides Whitestar's kits, more were soon to be on the way. Cricketsong had just become pregnant with her second litter, and Jaybird was fit to burst with a brood of her own. Even Ashwhisker was beginning to show signs of life in his belly.

"Now we'll finally have that empty void in our dens filled," Shadowpaw purred.

"Doubly," Mistypaw chimed in. Along with the nursery's fresh vacancy, the apprentice's den had lost two of its own residents in the second moon of Greenleaf. In their place Grassclan had gained two new warriors: Quailbelly and Heatherwing. But that left two empty nests in the den. Until today. Now the clan had eight warrior apprentices.

"They're going to be wonderful apprentices," Swiftpaw noted with a soft chuckle. "If a bit hard to deal with."

"They'll settle down over time. They aren't kits anymore, it'll only take a couple of days for them to get used to their new responsibilities," Mistypaw replied, smoothing down her shoulder fur. Shadowpaw nodded along in agreement. For the first time in a while, Swiftpaw took the time to study the tom. He had grown taller since Newleaf. His lanky body had finally bulked up, with muscles rippling under the sheen of his sleek black pelt. His muzzle was much more defined, adding to his handsomeness. But his personality remained the same. He was still the funny, flirtatious tom he'd been when they'd first met. Even if he took his duties a little more seriously now, he still took the time to show off. Flustered, Swiftpaw flicked her gaze onto Mistypaw. She too had become quite different over the moons. Now she was huge; once the same size as Swiftpaw herself, and now almost as large as a Treeclan warrior. Her fur had grown longer, becoming thicker as the days drew closer to Leafbare. But it still held it's moon like glimmer. Confidence radiated from the silver molly more than ever before. Swiftpaw remembered how quiet and gentle she had been when they first met. Now Mistypaw was brave enough to tell off even the grouchiest of elders; but still she was gentle enough to sooth a sobbing kit. She had to be the most beautiful she-cat Swiftpaw had ever seen. Even more flustered, the white and black patched she-cat gave her chest fur a few nervous licks. With her warrior ceremony soon approaching, she had been thinking a lot about her relationships. She wasn't ready to settle down yet, but it was difficult to deny that she wasn't mooning over any cat anymore.

"Did you hear me, Swiftpaw?" Shadowpaw's meow pulled her out of her thoughts. Swiftpaw blinked, whipping her head around to

address the black tom.

"Uh, no, sorry. What were you saying?"
Shadowpaw rolled his eyes.

"I was asking if you've thought about what jobs you wanna have as a warrior."
That was another thing Swiftpaw had been thinking about a lot. As much as she'd love to be a fighting warrior, she had to admit she wasn't as good at it as she'd like. So that definitely wasn't an option. Den Keeping was alright, as was Collecting. But Swiftpaw had a soft spot for hunting. She was one of the only Grassclan cats that could catch birds, and the only one who could grab one mid take off.

"Yeah, I think I've got an idea about what I wanna do."
Shadowpaw curled his tail in delight.

"All apprentices gather beneath Tall Stone!" Called Chicorynose, who had taken the clan leader's place on top of the ancient boulder. Shadowpaw jerked his head, motioning for Swiftpaw to follow him as he stood on tall, lanky legs. Swiftpaw dipped her head to Mistypaw as she rose to her paws, following the black tom over to Tall Stone's base.

"I'm sending the four of you out on two separate hunting patrols. This will be your final partnered assessment, and the second to last assessment before you are made warriors," Chicorynose explained, turning her green gaze onto each apprentice in turn. She hopped down from Tall Stone, herding each cat to their partner: Swiftpaw with Shadowpaw, and Frostpaw with Rabbitpaw.

"Remember to work together, and catch as much as you can. Tigerfang and I will be watching you. Good luck."

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Swiftpaw and Shadowpaw padded through the tall meadow grass, a cool mountain breeze ruffling their pelts. Carried on the wind was the smell of fresh pines, and the nearby sheep barn. Clenched tight in their jaws were two pieces of prey. Shadowpaw had caught a field mouse, and Swiftpaw a mole. The white and black patched

she-cat dropped her catch at her paws as they came to a halt in a small clearing. She pushed the creature towards her partner, turning her muzzle skywards. Shadowpaw bent down to bury their prey while Swiftpaw kept a lookout. A hawk was circling through the clouds nearby, and had been since they left camp. The apprentices had to be vigilant during their hunt today to avoid being hunted themselves. Tigerfang, before disappearing into the grass with Chicorynose, had made a comment about how this was somehow a good thing. He said it would help make the test more challenging, that it would be another obstacle they wouldn't have to test for another day before the final assessment. It was a peculiar remark, which Swiftpaw had found to be a bit tasteless. Who would wish for a predator to come flying around? She knew Tigerfang meant well, but it still seemed like a grim thing to be happy about. A cat could die if one was not careful. A shudder ran down the molly's spine as the thought of a cat being torn from the ground entered her imagination. The image of swooping talons lifting the unsuspecting off into the unknown, to be eaten, or left for dead made her blood run cold.
With this in mind, Swiftpaw watched above with wide eyes, crouched low to the ground. The raptor seemed to be flying lower now, gliding in smaller and smaller circles in the air. Then, in a flash, the large bird dove down, disappearing from sight. The apprentices waited a couple extra heartbeats to see if the hawk would take flight again. When they figured the coast was clear, the pair rose to their paws, going back on the prowl.

"Can you believe we're going to be warriors soon?" Swiftpaw mused with elation in her mew as they pressed on. She was trying to lighten her own mood as they headed away from where the hawk may possibly be. Shadowpaw turned his head to flash her a smile, tail raising high into the air.

"I know right? It feels like only yesterday that I was a brand new apprentice, attacking curious kittypets who dared to step paw onto our territory." A mischievous glint shone in the tom's meadow green eyes that made Swiftpaw purr with amusement.

"Oh yes, and it feels like only yesterday that a big black furball was pouncing on me and mewing at me like a smart-owl."

Shadowpaw chuckled, flicking her ear with the tip of his tail.

"That *was* only yesterday. That's what you get for throwing a wet mossball at me while I'm tending to the elders."

"Well I wouldn't have done it if you wouldn't have caught that mouse I was clearly hunting earlier." Swiftpaw defended herself, turning up her nose dramatically. In reality she wasn't mad about it at all, she had just felt like getting a little revenge. She liked doing things that would tempt Shadowpaw to play fight with her. It was one of her most favorite pastimes, even if it was juvenile.
Shadowpaw nudged her with his shoulder playfully as he came to a stop in a tussock of grass. Swiftpaw came to settle beside him, looking at him curiously.
"What's wrong?"
Shadowpaw's eyes scanned the meadow surrounding them, his expression quickly turning serious. He tail lowered and his hackles raised in alarm as he sniffed the breeze.

"Do you smell that?" He asked, furrowing his brow. Swiftpaw parted her jaws to taste the air, catching whiff of something she had only ever found stale scents of. It certainly wasn't a prey scent like she had initially thought Shadowpaw was smelling. It was something much larger, and far more dangerous than a hawk.

"Fox!" Shadowpaw hissed just as the sly creature slipped out of the grass into view. As its attention drew towards the startled cats, the fox's back arched, showing off its brilliant ginger pelt. Silver claws slid out of its nimble black paws threateningly. It seemed to be just as disquieted as the Grassclan apprentices were. Without thinking, Shadowpaw barreled towards it, letting out a mighty yowl. Swiftpaw bristled. *No you mouse-brain what are you doing?!* Her heart leapt in her chest, worry making every strand of fur on her body rise. To her relief, Shadowpaw stopped short of the creature, merely posturing. Swiftpaw crouched, tilting her head in wonder. Was he trying to spook the fox rather than fight? Shadowpaw gave the fox a false swipe from where he stood, spitting a warning at it. He made no indication of wanting to fight, despite his mighty display of bristled fur and folded back ears. The fox swiped its tounge over its lips, slinking forward with ears drawing back menacingly. It stayed low to the ground as it crept forward, its eyes

never leaving the black apprentice as it approached. Without warning, the crafty creature sprang upward, swiping at Shadowpaw with a large front paw. It bowled the tom over, knocking him out cold. Swiftpaw gasped, jumping to her paws.

"Shadowpaw!" She cried, leaping forward to attack the fox. She lunged at the creature's side, clawing at it and pulling on its scruff to distract it from further attacking her friend. But her efforts went without reward. She could barely break skin before the fox whipped around to toss her away. It slammed her with its snout, knocking the patched she-cat to the ground. The fox lifted a paw and swiped at Swiftpaw's shoulder, slicing it open faster than she had time to react. She let out a shriek, wriggling against the dusty floor in an attempt to slip away. But before she could stand up the fox was hovering above her once more. It held her down with one paw while tearing her flank with the other. Blood gushed from the wound, pain and tears following. *Starclan help us!* Swiftpaw begged internally as she looked up at the fox with wide, terrified eyes. The fox peeled its lips back to reveal its sharp canines, its mouth opening to allow its tongue to hang out. Rancid breath assaulted the white and black patched molly's nostrils, making her eyes water more so than before. The fox looked as if it was ready to take a bite out of the little cat. Swiftpaw squeezed her eyes shut, bracing herself for the fox's jaws. She was petrified, straight to the core. If she could run she would, but her body felt heavy as stone. She was trapped, about to be sent to be with her warrior ancestors. And what about Shadowpaw? Once the fox was done with her it would surely go back to finish him off. *Shadowpaw...*
Just then, a ferocious yowl split through the air; the weight pressing against Swiftpaw was lifted. Swiftpaw opened her eyes to see a furious ball of black fur tussling on the ground with the fox. Shadowpaw slashed at the creature's throat with sharp silver claws, slicing its skin open the more he tore at it. A rush of blood spilled from the wound causing the fox to howl out in pain. It slipped from Shadowpaw's grasp, backing away with a hoarse pant. It let out a sharp bark, countered by a loud hiss from the black tom. As they let out their battle cries, another cat emerged from the grass. It was Chicorynose, barreling at full speed to knock into the creature's side. The fox fell back to the ground with a yelp, orange eyes widening with surprise. It quickly recovered from the blow,

standing back up on shaky legs. It looked at Chicorynose for a heartbeat then Shadowpaw before turning tail to flee. When it was finally out of sight the two standing cats came to Swiftpaw's side.

"Swiftpaw, are you alright!?" Shadowpaw's meow was frantic as he bent down to wash the blood away from the she-cat's flank. Swiftpaw let out a shaky breath, forcing herself to sit up.

"I..I think so," she mewed, her body trembling uncontrollably. As she turned her head from Shadowpaw onto Chicorynose, the world felt as if it was shifting beneath her. Her ears were ringing with a roar of blood as she tried make herself focus and stand. Chicorynose brought herself closer to her apprentice allowing her to lean against her. Shadowpaw came to press himself against Swiftpaw's other side.

"She's in shock. We have to get her home to Goldensong," Chicorynose meowed, the sound coming off muffled to Swiftpaw. Shadowpaw nodded to the deputy in agreement. Together, the three of them made the slow trek back to Grassclan's camp.

The scent of blood seemed to draw the clan's attention just as soon as they pushed their way past the bramble barrier. Snowfrost was already waiting for them, herbs clenched tightly in her jaws. Marigold petal floated down to her paws as she dropped them. She was ready to bend down and create a poultice just as Chicorynose hissed at her.

"Don't touch her," she warned, walking to the medicine den with Shadowpaw. Goldensong emerged from the tree, green eyes widening at the sight of the arrivals. She beckoned them inside with a swish of her tail, disappearing behind the ivy tendrils. Swiftpaw took a glance back at Snowfrost before they went into the den. Snowfrost sat crouched in her spot, mouth half agape. Swiftpaw watched her shoot an icy glare at the Grassclan deputy before she disappeared from her sight. Gently the young molly was placed in a nest as Goldensong came padding over with thyme, cobwebs, and tormentil. She fed Swiftpaw the thyme to help ease her shock as she went to work, patching up her wounds. Shadowpaw and Chicorynose hovered at her side. Swiftpaw took a glance at the den's entrance as a cat made their way inside. It was Whitestar, fur

pricked with panic as she made her way over to investigate.

"What in Starclan's name happened?" She asked, a strange amount of worried emotion in her tone. Perhaps motherhood had made her become a bit more emotional.

"The apprentices were attacked by a fox. Shadowpaw here lunged at the beast with ferocity much like a Lionclan warrior. He saved Swiftpaw." Chicorynose explained, resting her tail on the tom's shoulder. Shadowpaw lifted his chin proudly, though his darkened eyes were troubled.

"Did he now?" Whitestar blinked with surprise, flicking her plumed tail. "Well then, bravery like that must be rewarded."

***

"Shadowpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code; to protest and defend this clan, even at the cost of your life?" Whitestar asked from atop Tall Stone, looking down at the black apprentice in question with grateful eyes. Shadowpaw lifted his chin, the brightest smile showing on his face.

"I do."

"Then by the power of Starclan, I give you your warrior name. Shadowpaw, from this day forward you shall be known as Shadowfang. Starclan honors your sharpness and hunting skills, and we welcome you as a full warrior of Grassclan." Whitestar jumped down from Tall Stone to tuck a blue flower behind the tom's ear before resting her muzzle on top of Shadowfang's head. In return the black tom licked her shoulder respectfully before watching her step back to continue the ceremony.

"For the time being, Shadowfang shall remain without a partner, but will be assigned to the jobs he has chosen; Hunter and Fighter. His duties shall begin the day after tomorrow. In the meantime, this cat will sit a silent vigil tonight and guard the camp while the rest of us sleep, to show that he is a true warrior of this clan."

"Shadowfang! Shadowfang! Shadowfang!" Swiftpaw cheered loudly

from the entrance of the medicine den, leading the clan in a welcoming chant. Shadowfang's pelt glowed with pride as his clanmates came to surround him. Purrs of congratulations rang out as he shouldered his way past.

"You saved my life. You really earned your warrior name today," Swiftpaw purred quietly, fighting back tears as the tom came to a stop in front of her. Shadowfang purred, giving her a few soft licks on the cheek.

"I couldn't let anything happen to my best friend. I know you'd do the same for me."

"In a heartbeat." Swiftpaw pulled away to gaze at her friend with the admiration and respect he deserved. She was still dazed, feeling wobbly and disoriented from the now fading shock of the fox attack. She still couldn't believe that they had even survived. But she was grateful for Shadowfang's bravery, and thankful to Starclan for sparing them so that he may become a warrior. *And that I may be one someday soon, too.*

Chapter 24

[image]

A breezy Leaf-Fall wind ruffled Swiftpaw's fur as she stalked through a long tussock of grass, the scent of a rabbit trapped in her nose. Today was the day of her final assessment, and after witnessing Shadowfang's warrior ceremony two moons ago, she couldn't wait to be a warrior already. After all, she was fourteen moons old now. All of her friends from the other clans had earned their names a couple moons ago. Now only she, Frostpaw, and Rabbitpaw remained to be named. But if she did well today, a meeting was sure to be called for them.

Quiet as an owl, Swiftpaw stalked through the grass, the brown pelt of her prey just within her line of sight. She took a moment to pause, raising her haunches to set them in the right position. With a small wiggle of her behind, the patched apprentice launched across the meadow. Her claws snagged the rabbit's flanks as she caught up with it, dragging the fuzzy creature in towards herself to deliver the killing blow. She bit hard into the creature's spinal cord until it made a satisfying snap. The rabbit went limp beneath her after a couple of heartbeats, its leg giving a final twitch as its life slipped away.

Soft earth covered the carcass as Swiftpaw hid her catch before going back on the prowl. The winds shifted as she padded along, the smell of Whitestar catching in her scent glands. *Is she proud of me?* She wondered, forcing her pelt to remain flat so as not to reveal her excitement. Sometimes it felt like only yesterday where she had met her. Whitestar was a wonderful cat. Her voice still soothed the younger molly whenever she heard it. It was a comforting mew; sweet as honey and soft as feathers. Like a queen's mew, like a mother's. The dreams Swiftpaw had before meeting her did Whitestar's meow no justice. Nor did they do the clan any justice. A feeling stirred within Swiftpaw's heart, one that she had never been able to feel back as a kittypet. She felt welcomed, she felt comfortable. With or without her clanmates surrounding her this feeling resided with her. Swiftpaw felt whole. As she padded across the meadow floor a familiar clearing opened up before her,

giving the she-cat pause. Swiftpaw halted in it's center, nostalgia washing over her like a wave. This was the clearing she had been in the first time she visited the meadow. This is where her dreams had led her. This is where her life truly began. For a few heartbeats, Swiftpaw took the time to shut her eyes and listen. Just like that faithful sunset, birdsong filled the molly's ears with their unscripted melody. *Beautiful, absolutely beautiful*. A rustle in the grass snapped Swiftpaw back into focus. This was no time for reminiscing. She was being tested, she had to put all her attention on the task at hand. Luckily for her, a piece of prey was practically scampering about right at her paws. After sniffing a bit she figured it to be a mouse; dropping down into the proper crouch to catch it. With paws barely skirting across the ground she inchwormed closer, pinning her ears back against her head. After another heartbeat she struck out, snatching up the little creature, ending it's life within another heartbeat. *Thank you, Starclan, for sending this mouse so that it may be used to feed my clan*, she prayed with head bowed before burying her new catch and moving on once more. Another sound made Swiftpaw's ears twitch and swivel, pointing in the noise's direction. She turned tail and dropped into another crouch, ready to take down whatever this new critter was. She parted her jaws to taste the air but could not catch a hint of whatever it may be. *I should be able to tell when I get closer,* she figured, stalking forward. Swiftpaw narrowed her eyes, straining to see what lay ahead of her. In another heartbeat the creature leaped out, and landed right on top of her. Swiftpaw let out a startled mew as she looked up at the weight pressing on her back.

"Frostpaw!" She yowled as she looked at the silver and white tabby on top of her. Frostpaw pulled back from tugging on Swiftpaw's ear to let out a giggle.

"Hiya, Swiftpaw!" She trilled.

"Frostpaw, get off me," Swiftpaw mewed in relpy, pawing at the fluffy she-cat's flank. Frostpaw happily obliged, leaping off her gracefully. Her long fur flowed as she turned tail to sit in front of her.

"So how's your assessment going?" She asked, lifting a paw to lick and rub against her cheek.

"It's going fine. I really should get back to it. As you should you. It's your assessment too."

"I knooow," Frostpaw griped. "Buut..um...."

"What?" Swiftpaw tilted her head, nubby tail twitching curiously.

"Well, I bumped into Whitestar not too long ago. Actually, it's more like she tried to ambush me and I caught on before she had the chance to..-anyways! After that, she told me if I run into you or Rabbitpaw, I should challenge you to a fight. I think she wants to see how we'd do against one another. So I'm here to ask you to spar with me."
Swiftpaw took a moment to mull the idea over before giving a nod in response.

"I guess it couldn't hurt," she agreed, rising to her paws. "Besides, if Whitestar asked you to do it, then how can I possibly say no? C'mon, let's battle!"
Frostpaw bounced before dropping into a crouch, stalking circles around her opponent. Swiftpaw eyed the larger she-cat, waiting to see if she'd make the first move. After an impatient wiggle of her nubby tail, her waiting finally paid off. Frostpaw leapt at Swiftpaw with paws extended, leaving room for the smaller molly to slip out of the way. Swiftpaw slid beneath her opponent, flipping onto her back to kick up at the other's underbelly. Frostpaw yelped in surprise, skirting across the earth to turn once landing after her jump. It was Swiftpaw's turn to attack now. Thinking for a moment, she thought a false front approach to be best. She brought herself forward, using a front paw to swipe at Frostpaw's face. When she flinched and moved to counter, Swiftpaw dodged and moved towards the larger she-cat's side. She barreled all her weight into her, knocking the molly to the ground. The two of them tussled and rolled in the grass in a flurry of clawless paws, playful nips, and exaggerated yowls. Swiftpaw managed to pin Frostpaw on her back, pummeling her belly with her back paws. Frostpaw kicked up into Swiftpaw's underbelly in turn, flinging her off. Swiftpaw landed a tail-length away, shaking out her ruffled pelt. She let out a low chuckle before charging back toward her opponent. Frostpaw had gotten back on her feet by now, standing on hind legs as the smaller molly rushed at her. This move was miscalculated, however, as it

gave Swiftpaw full advantage over her. Swiftpaw lowered her muzzle, headbutting Frostpaw in the chest, once again putting her on her back. Only this time, Swiftpaw wasn't going to let herself be throw off. She rested both of her back paws on Frostpaw's underbelly. One black paw and her barely clenched jaws moved to hold the other molly's neck. Her final white paw was planted firmly on the ground, claws unsheathed to grip the earth beneath it. Frostpaw went limp beneath her.

"Alright, I give, you win!" She conceded, wriggling. Swiftpaw pulled away at once, stepping off of her friend. She dipped her head respectfully to her and Frostpaw rolled back onto her paws.

"You put up a good fight," she remarked, raising her nubby tail.

"So did you," Frostpaw replied, giving herself a good shake. "I didn't think you'd get me so quickly. Great job. Now you have to track down Rabbitpaw and challenge him next. Whitestar told me to tell you that after we had the chance to spar first."
Swiftpaw perked up at this direction. Now she'd have to face Rabbitpaw? *This should be interesting.* Hopefully the tom would not be mad at her for attacking him. Though she was sure he'd understand when he'd learn it was ordered by Whitestar.

"I better go find him, then," Swiftpaw mewed.

"And I'd better get back to hunting. I'll see you later, Swiftpaw." Frostpaw turned to head back into the long meadow grass, waving her tail as she disappeared within it. "Good luck against my brother!"

***

Swiftpaw bounded through the field as quietly as she could, nostrils flaring as she scented the air for any signs of Rabbitpaw. Her head whipped from side to side as she searched for the fluffy lynx point tom, ready to stalk and pounce on him the heartbeat he was located. Swiftpaw swiveled her left ear back as a rustle in the grass caught her attention. She whipped her head around to look in that direction. A white mass could be spotted in the undergrowth, unaware of her presence. Thrill sparked in Swiftpaw's chest as she

turned like a snake, dropping to her belly. Silently she crept closer to the larger cat. When she was a fox-length away, she shot forward, leaping out of the grass and onto Rabbitpaw's back. Rabbitpaw let out a shriek of surprise, whirling around before dropping and rolling onto his back instinctively. Swiftpaw was crushed beneath his weight, letting out a pained squeak as he pushed back onto his feet. Rabbitpaw glared down at the grinning she-cat as he stood, long fur bushed to make him appear twice his size. Swiftpaw had to stifle a *mrrow* of laughter as she got back up to attack the tom again, swiping her paws low to try and trip him up. Rabbitpaw dodged her blows before dealing one of his own. He smacked Swiftpaw in the muzzle with a forepaw before pushing her over and onto her side. Swiftpaw wiggled and kicked in his grip until she managed to land a good blow to his flank, winding him. Rabbitpaw staggered sideways with a pant, letting out a feigned hiss. A mixture of confusion and betrayal showed in his features, and Swiftpaw knew there was some explaining to do. However, that would have to wait until after their battle.
When Rabbitpaw realized Swiftpaw wasn't going to explain herself, he threw himself at her again. Swiftpaw found herself unprepared for the hard hit of his blow and fell over onto her side again. Instead of attacking, Rabbitpaw simply came to sit on top of her, pinning her down with all of his weight. The more the smaller molly tried to move, the harder he pressed down, until she finally went limp beneath him.

"Get off me!" She squeaked. "You win, you win. Now get off!"

"Why did you attack me?" Rabbitpaw growled, looking down at Swiftpaw.

"Whitestar said I should! It's part of our assessment. She wanted to see how we'd do against each other."
Rabbitpaw perked up, slowly stepping off of Swiftpaw to allow her to stand. As she did, she gave herself a good shake. What was it with this family and sitting on her? First Frostpaw, and now Rabbitpaw. Who else of their kin would be next? Mistypaw? Jaybird? Dewstone?
Rabbitpaw gave his shoulder fur a few licks to help calm himself down. It would seem Swiftpaw's explanation had done the trick

alleviating Rabbitpaw's agitation towards her. What a relief that was, though she supposed if the tom was anything like his sister, he'd get her back for this.

"You could have come out and said so in the first place," Rabbitpaw muttered, "stupid furball."

"I thought it would be more realistic for me to sneak attack you. Like an enemy warrior would," Swiftpaw defended. Rabbitpaw simply grunted at her. "I think that was a good fight, wouldn't you agree?"

Rabbitpaw shrugged. "I guess. So, what now?"

"We go our separate ways, I suppose. Until after the assessment, that is."

"Sounds good to me." Rabbitpaw leaned back on his haunches to stretch before turning tail. "Good luck with the rest of your assessment. May the winds be with you."
This had been one of the rare few times Rabbitpaw had given her well wishes. It brought a bubble of warmth to Swiftpaw's chest, and she couldn't help but purr. Swiftpaw dipped her head to him respectfully before turning away.

"And may Starclan light your path."

***

The cool light of a nearly full moon washed over the clearing as Grassclan warriors settled by the base of Tall Stone, murmuring among themselves as the three eldest apprentices were beckoned forward. A meeting had been called, a very important meeting. One Swiftpaw had previously only had the pleasure of observing, and not experiencing herself. Finally after seven long moons it was her turn. Tonight was her warrior ceremony.

"These cats have completed their training, met all the goals set for them, and have learned the warrior code. Sheeptail, Gingerstrike, Chicorynose, do you believe your apprentices are ready to become warriors?"

"I do," the mentors chimed unanimously. The trio sat a fox-length away from their apprentices, all glowing with accomplishment. Their fur was neatly groomed, bathed in sparkling moonlight. This was a proud achievement for them, almost as much as it was for their apprentices. They had a right to be proud, having been responsible for training the next generation of warriors. It would feel weird, not having to go out training with Chicorynose anymore, Swiftpaw noted. She wouldn't be the first responsible for cleaning the elders for ticks, or changing nursery bedding anymore either. Which was relieving, she had to admit, though she still promised herself to visit the elders and queens often.

"Frostpaw, Rabbitpaw, and Swiftpaw, please step forward." Nervously, the three apprentices took a few paces towards Tall Stone, tilting their heads back to gaze up at its peak. A flutter stirred in Swiftpaw's belly like butterflies as she locked eyes with her leader. *I can't believe it, I'm going to be a warrior!* Beside her, she could sense the anxiety of her denmates. Swiftpaw gave a quick glance towards both of them before returning her attention to Whitestar. Frostpaw looked as if she was trying to contain her energy, while Rabbitpaw looked as if he was ready to pass out. "I, Whitestar, leader of Grassclan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on these apprentices. They have worked hard to learn the ways of your noble code, and I commend them, to you, as warriors in their turn. Frostpaw, Rabbitpaw, Swiftpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code; to protest and defend this clan, even at the cost of your lives?"

"I do!" Frostpaw trilled excitedly.

"I do,"meowed Swiftpaw and Rabbitpaw in unison, exchanging glances.

"Then by the power of Starclan, I give you your warrior names. Frostpaw, from this day forward you shall be known as Frostfeather. Starclan honors your geniality and light footedness." Whitestar meowed, leaping down from her perch with three flowers in her jaws. She dropped all but one on the ground, tucking the last one behind the new warrior's ear. It was a coreopsis, Swiftpaw recognized it from the flowers Frostfeather wore on Bloom's Day. After placing it on the new warrior, Whitestar rested her muzzle on

Frostfeather's head. In return, Frostfeather gave her shoulder a respectful lick. A heartbeat passed before Whitestar took a step back to continue the ceremony.

"Rabbitpaw, from this day forward you shall be known as Rabbitstorm. Starclan honors your quick thinking and attitude." Again, Whitestar repeated the motions with the newly named Rabbitstorm, marking his ear with a stem of purple heather before stepping back once more.
"And Swiftpaw, from this day forward you shall be known as Swiftcloud. Starclan honors your idealism and creativity, and we welcome you all as full warriors of Grassclan."

A small blue flower was place by Swiftcloud's ear. *It's chicory!* Was it to honor Chicorynose? There was no time to question it outwardly right now. It was Swiftcloud's turn to lick Whitestar's shoulder as her chin came to rest against her forehead. Her body trembled as she watched her leader step back to look at each new warrior in turn.

"Frostfeather! Rabbitstorm! Swiftcloud!" The clan cheered for a while, only falling silent when Whitestar waved her tail. *Swiftcloud. Swiftcloud. Swiftcloud.* The name echoed in the white and black patched molly's head. She was finally a warrior. But the ceremony wasn't quite over yet.

"From this point on, Frostfeather will be partnered with Quailbelly. She has chosen to follow the path of a Den Keeper and Collector. Rabbitstorm shall be the new partner of Bumblethroat. He will be performing the duties of a Guard. Finally, Swiftcloud shall henceforth be the partner of Shadowfang. Her jobs will be Hunter and Spy. These cats' duties shall begin the day after tomorrow. In the meantime they will sit a silent vigil tonight and guard the camp while the rest of us sleep, to show that they are true warriors of this clan," Whitestar announced. With that, the crowd charged forward to surround the new warriors, mewing their welcome and congratulations to each of them. Frostfeather let out a trill, launching herself into the crowd, right onto Quailbelly. The two she-cats tumbled on the ground in a fit of joy filled giggles, licking each other's muzzles with glee. Rabbitstorm found himself flanked by both of his mothers who purred together with pride,

Heatherwing rounding them to give him congratulations. Swiftcloud tried her best to thank every one of the cats surrounding her, whipping her head around to acknowledge each of her clanmates. Pride swelled in her heart as the clan engulfed her with their warmth. Once, Swiftcloud had felt as if she were only an outsider, living on the inside, being tolerated by the cats of the clan. But today she realized she was one part of the same whole. This was her family; she was as much a part of them as they were a part of her. A sense of belonging wrapped itself around Swiftcloud as more of Grassclan pressed around her. *I'm a Grassclan warrior.*

Chapter 25

The full moon hung high in the sky as Grassclan made its way through the Forest Patch northward, far past the river, all the way up to the Gathering Clearing. Pale moonlight shined upon their backs, lighting their way and guiding their paws. Swiftcloud could see every leaf and fern on the bushes surrounding them as they padded single file through the woods. The moon seemed to be shining brighter this evening, and Swiftcloud couldn't help but think it was for her sake. Her bright blue eyes traveled to the sky above. Silverpelt's glow too seemed strengthened this night. Was this how things appeared to every cat upon their first Gathering as a warrior?
One by one cats spilled past the shrub barrier as they arrived to the gathering, waiting to be dismissed by Whitestar. Swiftcloud glanced around eagerly, flanked by Shadowfang who nudged her towards a shedding beech tree where some of their friends had gathered. On Whitestar's command the patrol was free to separate. Swiftcloud and Shadowfang hurriedly walked towards their friend group, mewing a greeting as they came to settle beside them. There were three cats here by the tree, each friends from different clans. Two of which were cats Swiftcloud had introduced to one another a few gatherings ago. There was Pinepelt, an old friend of hers from apprentice-hood. She'd gotten larger since their first meeting, her fur growing thicker and longer in preparation for the colder seasons ahead. Then there was Stemflower. Swiftcloud had had the pleasure of meeting her through Quailbelly. She was the oldest of their clique, but still acted as youthful as a freshly named warrior. There was a third cat here Swiftcloud didn't recognize, but figured was at least acquainted with the rest of the group. Shadowfang stepped up to raise his tail to the cat as the stranger spoke.

"It's great to see you again, Shadowfang," meowed the strange tom with long, white, sand dusted fur. His pelt carried the strong scent of seawater, and Swiftcloud had to resist scrunching up her nose. Shadowfang let out a chuckle, blinking at his Oceanclan friend warmly.

"Likewise, Hazestorm. Meet my partner, Swiftcloud. She was just made warrior last night." A deep purr rumbled in his throat as he spoke, eyes full of fondness as he rested them on Swiftcloud.

"And you still had energy to make it to the gathering after your vigil? Impressive," Hazestorm commented, twitching his whiskers. Swiftcloud ducked her head in embarrassment, feeling the nudge of Shadowfang's shoulder against hers once more. She glanced up to see the corners of his muzzle twist upward into a reassuring smile which warmed her heart and gave her back her confidence.

"I couldn't let the Land's Star find out about my new name and not be there to hear them cheer it." She lifted her chin now, a grin of her own forming on her patched face. "After all, I'm a warrior now. I have to push myself like one, even if I am tired."
Hazestorm flicked his fluffy tail, nodding along in agreement.

"Very true." The white warrior's attention was quickly taken off of Swiftcloud as a new cat approached the group. "Moonface." He purred, turning to bump his head against the arriving she-cat. Swiftcloud trilled with joy.
Moonface, her friend from Treeclan, had earned her warrior name two moons ago, after surviving an attack from a supposed rouge. Though there were rumors floating around that it had been a member of her own clan who had viciously attacked. Supposedly, this cat had launched an attack against Sunflower, a cat Moonface had shown interest in from what Swiftcloud had seen at previous gatherings. Moonface had intervened, ultimately saving her friend's life. Swiftcloud wouldn't have known any of this, had it not been for the ever talkative Jaybird. Despite the talk, and despite the nasty claw-moon shaped scar the battle had marked Moonface with, the molly had earned her name reminding all those who'd speak it of her beauty. *And beautiful she is at that*, Swiftcloud noted. In some ways, the shape of her body, and the gleam of the molly's silver and white coat reminded her a lot of Mistypaw. *But Mistypaw is still far more beautiful.*

"So, Swiftcloud, is it?" An intrigued purr rose from Moonface as she addressed the new warrior. "What a pretty name, I really like it. It suits you."

Swiftcloud let out another trill. "Thanks, Moonface."

"Was your vigil hard? It had gotten pretty chilly last night."

"It was a bit cold, but I was flanked by Frostfeather and Rabbitstorm. The pair are so fluffy they kept me warm all through the night."
The group of cats burst into a series of *mrrows*.

"Its a good thing they were there then," Moonface giggled.
From behind the molly, a fluffy black mass passed by, rounding the group and stepping out of the shadows.

"Well well, look at what we have here," meowed the cat, voice laced with spite. Swiftcloud lowered her head as she watched the tip of Moonface's tail begin to wag. Others in their group frowned at the new arrival, displeased by the interruption. Stemflower's tail flicked while Pinepelt muttered something quietly to Shadowfang, who snickered in response.

"What do you want, Nightshade?" Moonface asked flatly.
Nightshade lifted her head and smirked, revealing her inner mischievous urges.

"A little birdie told me there's a new warrior among your ranks," she responded trying to sound cheerful. But Moonface did not seem pleased, and Swiftcloud felt the same. A bad feeling formed in her gut, forcing her to press herself into Shadowfang's side for moral support. She hated this feeling, the sense of dread that came to her every now and then, seemingly for no reason at times. Though right now this was not one of those times. There was obvious ill intent shining in Nightshade's cold blue eyes. No doubt she was up to no good.

"I'm the new warrior," Swiftcloud spoke up, attitude apparent.

"You?" Nightshade snorted. "I can't believe Whitestar *actually* made you a warrior! I'd thought you'd have run home to your Twolegs by now." She took a pace closer to Swiftcloud, lowering her head so they'd meet eye to eye.
"That's where you came from, isn't it? A soft life of pampering and

comfort?" Nightshade watched the nubby tailed molly carefully to see if her words offended her. It's what she wanted; she was just itching to pick a fight and it was obvious to everyone who was there to bare witness.
"It's bad enough that an ugly cat like you has to be such a blemish in Grassclan's ranks. It's worse to know that this blemish is a nasty little *kittypet*!"
Swiftcloud did not react. Not physically. Her voice, however, betrayed how she was feeling inside.

"I left that life behind moons ago," Swiftcloud growled. "I *am* a warrior now. And I always will be." She took a step forward so that she and Nightshade were in each other's faces. "My name is Swiftcloud. If you have an issue with my status, I'll gladly demonstrate how capable I am. I'm not as soft as you may think."
Nightshade drew her lips back in a snarl, a look of despise crossing her features. Swiftcloud stared her down, keeping a straight face as she did so. Though inside she was panicking. She didn't want to fight unless it was necessary. Certainly not at a gathering. But she wasn't going to stand by and allow herself to be insulted, in front of her friends no less. She was afraid of what Nightshade could do, but she had to stand her ground no matter what. *You must prove yourself fearless, even in the presence of something that scares you.* Tigerfang's words echoed in Swiftcloud's mind from her first day in camp. She had never forgotten that first lesson, and used it well even til this day. It served useful. Though Swiftcloud feared the loud thudding of her anxious heart may divulge the fright she tried so hard to mask.

"You have kittypets in your own clan too," Pinepelt commented.

"The kittypet that we have came to Treeclan as a young kit. She doesn't count the way Swiftcloud does. She wasn't raised to be soft like her."

"Your argument is weak, Nightshade. The Land's Star was founded by cats who weren't clan born, *including* kittypets. They are just as capable as the rest of us," Moonface chimed in.
Swiftcloud's friends began to move closer together, alienating Nightshade and staring her down. Nightshade glanced at each cat, shoulder fur rising in obvious discomfort. She parted her jaws to say

something but promptly clampt her jaws shut. She lowered her head, turning to walk away without another word.

"Don't listen to her, Swift," Shadowfang murmured.

"You're alright," Moonface assured. "She's nothing but a bee-brained enabler."

"How do you stand having her as a clanmate?" Stemflower asked Moonface, smoothing down her shoulder fur. "In Marshclan, a cat like that would be getting mud and beetles stuffed into her nest for being so disrespectful."

Moonface sighed. "She's incredibly difficult to live with, I'll tell you."
Hazestorm gave the molly a nudge, beckoning her away from the group. The duo talked quietly for a heartbeat then mewed a goodbye before running off together into the crowd. Shadowfang stood with a stretch, prompting Swiftcloud to follow him away as well. The partners said farewell, then left the rest of their friend group behind to find a place to sit closer to Split Rock. The gathering would begin shortly no doubt. The pair managed to get a decent seat close to where the medicine cats had gathered. Mistypaw abandoned her peers in favor of laying beside Swiftcloud, pressing her warm fluffy body into hers. Swiftcloud couldn't be happier to have her two best friends with her here tonight. And their warmth in the chilly night air was certainly welcoming, too.

"Let the gathering begin!" Trilled Brightstar from the giant split boulder, grabbing the attention of all those in the clearing. Cats all around Swiftcloud settled down, taking their seats and tilting their heads back to give their undivided attention to the leaders of the Land's Star. The flame point she-cat, Brightstar, stood tall on her place ready to speak once the chatter had died down.

"Marshclan is doing wonderfully this time of year! Firstly, I'd like to introduce the Land's Star to our medicine cat apprentice, Cherrypaw, along with her warrior apprentice sibling, Hummingpaw! Secondly, I'd like to introduce our newest warriors: Spiderbelly and Sedgebelly."

"Cherrypaw! Hummingpaw! Spiderbelly! Sedgebelly!" Cats from the various clans caterwauled together, turning to the named cats to give them congratulations. Brightstar paused to allow cats to cheer before piping up again, instantly silencing the clatter.

"Lastly, I'd just like to say the prey is running well in the marsh, and it looks like this will be a good Leaf-fall. Here's to another good moon!"
Whitestar was the next to address the clan cats as Brightstar took a big step back to hand over the spotlight. A buzz of excitement like static electricity prickled Swiftcloud's fur and she couldn't help but press herself further into Mistypaw.

"Grassclan is also fairing well this moon. To start, I have also named three new warriors just last night, and they are here among us this evening. I proudly present to the Land's Star: Frostfeather, Rabbitstorm, and Swiftcloud."

"Frostfeather Rabbitstorm Swiftcloud!" The crowd roared. Swiftcloud purred loudly, earning her licks on each ear from both Mistypaw and Shadowfang.

"We are expecting three new litters to be born in our ranks at any time now. Prey is running well, and we have faced no troubles in the past moon. That is all I have to report."
And with that, Whitestar stepped back to allow the next leader to come forward. It seemed to be Treeclan's turn to speak now. Blazestar stood tall on his part of Split Rock, turning his judging orange gaze down on the cats below. It was clear whatever news he had to share tonight would not be pleasant.

"A cat attacked our Den Mother last night while she was out hunting. She only has a few wounds, thankfully, but it's obvious that whoever went after her aimed to kill. I am displeased to have to report this, as Treeclan has been left in peace for several moons now. However, I will not stand by and watch while one of our best warriors is harmed so maliciously," he began, turning his broad head to look at said cat.
"Brightsky, describe your attacker."
The queen in question, a white and black patched she-cat, rose to her paws. Those around her backed away to give her some space.

The queen's sky blue eyes shone all the anxiety she was still clearly feeling. A tom stood next to her, his long fur a recognizable sight. The cat was none other than Wolfheart. Swiftcloud had learned moons ago that the two were mates, and tonight he seemed to prove that. Wolfheart stood protectively next to Brightsky, his fluffy grey and white tipped tail draped over her shoulders. Near it, a bundle of cobwebs lay plastered against the back of Brightsky's neck and shoulder. It was a big wad too, probably covering a wound that was just as large. Swiftcloud wondered how the Den Mother managed to drag herself to the gathering when she was clearly badly injured.

"Everything happened so fast, I barely had a chance to have good look at them," Brightsky meowed, leaning against Wolfheart. "I only caught their main pelt color: white. And their eyes...their eyes were startling. Piercing blue, even in the shade of night. I noticed something else too; they had the undeniable scent of wild flowers and dew clinging to their fur like a tick. If there's one thing I know for sure, its that the cat who attacked me is a member of Grassclan."
A murmur broke out among the crowd, cats from four of the clans-mainly Treeclan-turned to glare at all Grassclan cats who fit the description.
Swiftcloud looked around, searching for her clanmates who may be under watch. The first cat she spotted was Dewstone, with head held high and muzzle turned away from those who dare even glance in her direction. *She's a Code Keeper for Starclan's sake! Do cats really think someone who has devoted their whole life to up keeping the Warrior Code would attack another for no reason?!* Her gaze wandered around further, landing on Sheeptail and Rabbitstorm who stood side by side, staring daggers and snarling at their accusers. Swiftcloud's blue gaze turned to find Snowfrost. When she found her, she noticed that the lynx point molly was the only mostly white Grassclan cat with blue eyes to be ignored. *It must be because she's a medicine cat.* Swiftcloud suddenly felt herself being watched. She whipped her head around, finding the judgmental eyes of those around her baring into her. She felt small under their harsh gaze. The white and black patched molly crouched down, pinning her ears back against her head. Her eyes were as large as the full moon that shone overhead. *I didn't do anything!* She argued in her mind. *Am I really a suspect..?* She felt

like screaming and pleading innocent, or running. But she knew she could do neither, cats would judge her more harshly if she cracked under pressure for a crime she didn't commit. Shadowfang pressed into her as he caught Swiftcloud's fearscent while Mistypaw moved to knead her paws gently against the other molly's flank.
In the near distance a growl rung out, drawing the attention of the gathering cats back onto Split Rock. Whitestar's fur was bristled, her tail wagging like Swiftcloud had never seen before. Whitestar was always so calm, but with tensions being so high between Grassclan and Treeclan, it was no wonder that she finally lost patience with this harsh accusation. Swiftcloud was surprised it took so long.

"No Grassclan cat would dare attack a Den Mother; we are not savages!" She spat. "Where is your proof, Blazestar? How do you know it wasn't a rogue who attacked her instead?"

"I'd recognize the stench of Grassclan anywhere!" Brightsky defended herself, shooting a cold glance over at where the medicine cats sat. Snowfrost turned her head away, grooming her shoulder as if she were nervous. Wolfheart shrank back a bit, whispering something into his mate's ear. The injured Den Mother hissed at him, turning her attention back up to the clan leaders.

"Brightsky is a very capable cat, Whitestar. One of our finest trackers. She knows the scent of every clan and every prey in the forest, just as well as she knows the scents of her kin. When warriors came to her aid, they also scented Grassclan on her pelt. I don't doubt Brightsky's identification, even for a heartbeat. *There's* my proof. What proof do you have that none of your cats committed this crime?"
Cats from Treeclan yowled in agreement while Grassclan cats spat and cursed at those who even so much as sniff at them wrong. Swiftcloud felt as if she were caught between a rock and a hard place. On one paw, she could agree with the evidence presented; if multiple cats had reported scenting Grassclan then there must have been a Grassclan cat on their territory. On the other she was torn by her loyalty; Swiftcloud couldn't imagine one of her clanmates attempting to kill a cat in cold blood, Treeclan's *Den Mother* no less. What was the truth? Only Starclan and the attacker knew for sure.
Whitestar stood speechless on Split Rock, staring daggers at

Blazestar as she thought about what to say next. It was clear she was trying to be careful with her words. If she were to say something out of line right now it would surely cause a fight, which would break the full moon truce and thus the Warrior Code. Doing so would prove Blazestar right and make Grassclan seem even guiltier than they already did.
Judgemental eyes settled upon Grassclan's leader. Whispers rose from the cats in the clearing.

"What if she was the one who attacked Brightsky?" meeped a Treeclan apprentice within Swiftcloud's range. Swiftcloud had to resist the urge to turn and box the disrespectful cat's ears. Rage boiled inside her belly. Whitestar was once a Fighting Warrior, but she'd never attack a cat unprovoked. Everyone in Grassclan knew that. Did cats outside the clan really think a leader would stoop so low as to attack a cat on another's territory? Swiftcloud's thoughts were dragged back to the stories of Pebblestar the Malevolent. From what she knew of her, the Oceanclan leader would pick needless fights, even with cats across the border. Perhaps the Land's Star hadn't fully recovered from her rule just yet. Cats were still wary that an enemy leader may pull those types of shenanigans again. Swiftcloud could understand, but was still outraged knowing cats thought the leader most likely to do that right now was Whitestar.

"I will have a Spy Warrior investigate..." Whitestar finally mewed after heaving a harsh sigh. "Whoever is responsible will be punished accordingly."

"Don' go easy on em eitha!" yowled Oceanclan's new deputy, Silverdrop. "Give 'em ah Warrior-Paw ceremoneh."

"Or better yet, exile them!" cheered the same Treeclan apprentice in a far too enthusiastic tone. *Arrogant kit.* A warrior hushed the young tom.

"This is not your place to speak out, Sleekpaw," she hissed, swatting the apprentice behind the head with her tail. Sleekpaw let out a whimper, crouching in his place dismissively.
Murmurs of disbelief rippled through the crowd. Whitestar glared at any cat she spotted who spoke out negatively. Blazestar let out a low growl, tail lashing.

"What good is your word?" He snarled. "We had an agreement before. And your clan broke it! How could I trust you to find the cat responsible for attacking Brightsky?"

"Blazestar-"

"Don't you *dare* speak my name as if we were allies! I have had it with you, and your pompous group of cats. You accuse my clan of killing your warriors, of trespassing, and now this! I cannot stand by and watch the innocent suffer, Whitestar. Tonight, I will uphold the full moon truce. But starting tomorrow, our clans are at *war*."

"War?" Brightstar meeped. "Isn't that a little harsh?"

"A little war could do them some good," Wavestar grunted. Blazestar turned on him.

"If you think this will give you an opening to take more of Treeclan's land, you are surely mistaken!" He spat. Wavestar narrowed his eyes.

"Watch who you're talking to in that tone. There isn't a need to drag me into this feud."

"Says the fox-heart who advances into our territory at every chance he gets!"

"You must have me mistaken for Pebblestar, you-"

"I wouldn't put it past you to turn out like her. You may have been against your sister, Wavestar, but you've certainly gone out of your way to carry on a lot of the traditions she left behind."

"That's enough, tonight is a night of peace, not an opportunity to pick fights!" Whitestar jumped in. Blazestar swung back around and slashed the Grassclan leader's muzzle.

"Stay out of this!"
The crowd below Split Rock broke out into a crescendo of yowls. Cats began to disburse and regroup with those from their own clans.
Swiftcloud had never seen the leaders act like this before. Blazestar

had to be madder than a fox in a fit. The rest of the Land's Star was no better, she decided. Though cats had split up, the individual groups still took the time to spit hateful words and shoot angry glares. The gathering was in chaos. As Swiftcloud watched the mayhem, she started to feel a cat bristle and shake beside her. Mistypaw pressed her larger body into Swiftcloud's, making herself small against the floor. Her pale green eyes were as wide as the full moon above, her gaze fixed on the sky. She trembled, mouth parting slowly as she struggled to choke out what she had to say.

"Lo..look!" She yowled as loudly as she could. Collectively the crowd looked to the medicine cat apprentice, then followed her line of sight. Swiftcloud tilted her head back to give her attention to the stars. Or lack thereof. Clouds had mysteriously started to gather, though only heartbeats before the sky was clear. The thick shapes floated across the inky blackness, consuming starlight, and eventually covered the moon. Gasps and outcries of shock rose up from the crowd, panic and fear surging through those of the gathering. Swiftcloud too found herself feeling alarmed.

"Starclan has spoken their disapproval. This gathering is over!" Declared Fogstar. At once the feuding leaders broke away from each other, falling into silence.
"Had it not been for the three of you, Starclan would not have been angered. Go now, settled your scores on your own time. And pray for forgiveness for breaking tonight's truce. May the stones guide your path."
With that, Fogstar jumped down from Split Rock, calling his clan together. Brightstar glanced at each of the other leaders before going to do the same. Wavestar was the next leader to leave, although he took his time doing so. Meanwhile Whitestar and Blazestar were locked in each other's glares, a silent battle waging between them. Blazestar was the one to break away, finding no pleasure in this staring contest. At last, Whitestar came down from her perch, stalking across the open field.
Whitestar made it to the edge of the clearing, observing her clanmates as they warily padded towards her past testy Treeclan cats and the judgmental meows of others. The Grassclan leader had an array of emotions scrawled across her face. Insecurity, fatigue, confusion, sadness. Nothing good, Swiftcloud noted. The white and

black patched she-cat looked behind her from where she still sat with Shadowfang and Mistypaw. Hazestorm and Moonface had become noticeable in the thinning crowd, the white warrior giving the molly a few licks goodbye before scurrying off to join his clan. Moonface made her way over to Wolfheart and Brightsky, reciving nuzzles from both of them. Swiftcloud noticed Snowfrost trying to slink over to the family, eyeing them with what Swiftcloud assumed to be fascination. Moonface locked eyes with the lynx point medicine cat before nudging her injured mother in the opposite direction. Wolfheart bristled, assisting her in bringing the Den Mother over where Treeclan gathered. *What's that all about*? Swiftcloud wondered, her attention stolen back by a tail brushing against her ear. Swiftcloud flicked her gaze onto Shadowfang who nodded towards their clanmates. Swiftcloud blinked in understanding, rising to her paws to follow her friends back towards the others. Judgmental eyes still bore into Swiftcloud's pelt as the three regrouped, the uncomfortable heat of embarrassment burning the molly beneath her fur. She forced the fur on her shoulders to lay flat and kept her eyes steady on the path ahead. Giving anyone who judged her attention would lead to no good, no doubt. Keeping to herself was for the best. As the last of Grassclan's warriors huddled around their shaken leader, Whitestar flicked her tail and slipped through the bushes. One by one the rest of the clan followed suit, making the wary journey home to report the news from tonight's full moon meeting to the rest of the awaiting clan.

Chapter 26

[image]

A sense of dread hung over the clearing when morning came back around. Cats stiffly emerged from their dens, huddling around each other with wariness. Though the accusations brought upon them the night before should have driven the clan-especially those under investigation-from one another, the event actually served to bring the clan closer. Swiftcloud crawled out from the warrior's den to gaze upon the faces of her clanmates. Her attention first settled on Whitestar, who was laying by the base of Tall Stone. Cricketsong and Chicorynose lay at either side of her; the three sisters sharing tongues. Swiftcloud's gaze drifted, catching Frostfeather and Quailbelly snuggling by the fresh-kill pile. Frostfeather seemed to be sitting on top of her mate like a hen would with her chicks, warming the thinner coated molly. Quailbelly was hardly visible under the other she-cat's fluffy pelt, though she seemed quite happy with that. A purr rose in Swiftcloud's throat as she continued to look around. She spotted Rabbitstorm by the nursery, tucked underneath Jaybrid who was carefully grooming his head, probably purring into his ear to sooth him. She hadn't been at the gathering last night, but Swiftcloud figured her son had filled her in on what had occurred. A troubled look was stuck upon his lynx pointed face, eyes darkened with sadness. Snowfrost was seated beside the pair to the right, the same look of distress on her own lynx point face. To the left lay Heatherwing, with legs tucked beneath her and body pressed into Rabbitstorm's exposed side. Curious, Swiftcloud trotted over to the group to find out what may be bothering her friend.

"Bunny, it's alright, no cat doubts your loyalty." She caught Snowfrost saying. Rabbitstorm lowered his ears, hiding his face in his paws. Heatherwing nuzzled the tom's cheek, Jaybird rasped her tongue against his ear comfortingly, and Snowfrost continued to mew words of encouragement to her nephew. Her voice was so sure, and yet so soft. Like that of her queen sister. She sounded as if she were a mother herself with her tone. Swiftcloud had never seen this side of Snowfrost before. She always came off as cold and

calculating, a cat who hardly cared for the emotions of others. Yet here she was, acting as soft and gentle as the snow she was named for. Swiftcloud did not know the true bonds of which Snowfrost shared with her clanmates. She seemed pretty isolated from the rest of the clan; it was rare to see her talking to anyone else except her kin and Goldensong. Even Whitestar seemed pretty avoidant of her, even when she was having her kits a couple moons ago. It was peculiar. Perhaps that's how Snowfrost liked things? But that certainly couldn't be the case, or at least not entirely. Snowfrost was a medicine cat, yet a rare few came to her for medical assistance. Most preferred Goldensong to her. Why was that, Swiftcloud wondered. Perhaps she would have to investigate later.

The white and black patched she-cat was pulled from her thoughts as a whimper made its way to her ears. She perked up, looking at the cat who made such a sound. It was Rabbitstorm, with cheeks now being nuzzled by the three she-cats surrounding him. Rabbitstorm had always tried to present himself as tough, but in reality the tom could be quite sensitive. Last night he had stood strong, ready to face any who challenged him. But now in the face of his kin and friend, he was willing to show how soft he was.

Jaybird drew her attention from her fretful child onto the visiting warrior in front of them. She took a few heartbeats to look the younger molly straight in the eye, her expression serious.

"Swiftcloud, promise me you will help to clear Rabbitstorm's name. And the names of all the cats in our clan who have been falsely accused of such a heinous act."

Swiftcloud was taken aback by this request. Did Jaybird truly trust her that much? The two had bonded a bit back when Swiftcloud was younger, punished with camp confinement and nursery duty. But she hadn't thought the queen had this much faith in her.

"I know Dewstone trusts your input. You have assisted her before. I know you will do so again."

So that's what this was about. A small mewl rose from Rabbitstorm's throat. Jaybird resumed grooming him, having to shift a bit in her position. The she-cat's belly was overly plump with kits. If one stared long enough they could spot an occasional kick. *How awful. Jaybird has to worry about her new litter and the safety of her previous one.* Swiftcloud wiggled her nubby tail.

"I will do my best to help," she promised. As she parted her jaws to

continue, a familiar yowl rose from across the clearing.

"Let all cats old enough to run across the meadow gather here beneath Tall Stone for a clan meeting."
Cats began to fill in around the ancient boulder. Rosebloom and her kits-Seedkit, Thistlekit, and Pansykit-came crawling out of the nursery, Ashwhisker right behind them. Swiftcloud left the group in favor of sitting beside some of the warriors. She settled herself between Ladybugbite and Shadowfang. Through the crowd popped another familiar cat. Tulippaw came to lay in front of her, pale green eyes glimmering with anticipation. More cats soon huddled around until most of the clan was present.
Whitestar stood stiffly atop Tall Stone, head raised confidently despite herself. Her tail-tip swayed ever so slightly, exposing her anxiousness. For a while she remained silent, allowing a murmer to echo through the throng of cats below her.

"A difficult situation seems to have befallen over our clan." The clan instantly hushed at Whitestar's meow. "Many of us, including myself, have been unjustly accused of attacking Brightsky of Treeclan....And now because of it, I fear that I must announce the upcoming war which Blazestar has declared." Her voice seemed to catch in her throat at times, as if this were a hard announcement to make. Though not hard, saying it did lead to an uproar.

"War?!" Jaybird shrieked, crouching down, wrapping her thin tail around Rabbitstorm.

"A war? Right before Leafbare?" Smokesnout rasped worriedly.

"Haven't we fought enough with Treeclan in recent moons? This is ridiculous!" Caterwauled Sheeptail.

"Surely there is something that can be done to stop this?" Squeaked Cloverpetal with ears lowered. More outcries like this rose from cats of all ages. Whitestar looked at all who spoke up, troubled.

"Silence!" She roared, once again hushing the crowd. Lightkit and Thornkit-Whitestar's litter-popped their heads out of Tall Stone to investigate the ruckus going on outside their den. Whitestar glanced down at them, allowing Tigerfang to draw the kits forward to listen

in on the rest of the meeting. The leader heaved a harsh sigh, making herself stand taller.
"At this time, there is nothing we can do but prepare. I need every cat ready at all times. We don't know when or where Treeclan will strike. I need guards stationed at the nursery and medicine den whenever the camp is low on other warriors. No cat is to travel or hunt without a partner by their side. All suspicious activity is to immediately be reported to Dewstone, Chicorynose, or myself. Spy warriors be ready to investigate the Treeclan border frequently."
Whitestar paced as she gave her orders, trying very hard to keep her composure. "Collectors, travel with Snowfrost and Mistypaw to gather as many herbs as possible. Goldensong, you are to remain in camp, no matter what. We cannot lose our medicine cat. We must be ready!"
Swiftcloud had never seen the leader in such a state. Perhaps it was because she was realizing the truce she'd argued with Blazestar to gain was ending. Perhaps it was because of the hardship of surviving not only Leafbare, but now a war. How would the clan last if they grew injured and sick in the upcoming moons?
The meeting was dismissed shortly after Whitestar's speech. Fighting and Hunting warriors hurried into their pairs, traveling out of camp to hunt and train. Mentors called for their apprentices.

"I don't want to go to The Dip," Tulippaw whined up at Swiftcloud, whom she still sat next to.

"But The Dip is where apprentices practice battling," Swiftcloud reminded her. "You've gotta prepare."

"Then come with me! It'll be more fun if you're there to watch and give me advice."

"But why? Don't you like your mentor?" Swiftcloud queried, surprised. From what she'd seen, Ambereye was a good teacher. The two seemed to get along well. Why was Tulippaw acting like this?

"Yeah, but I like you. I want *you* to teach me, Swiftcloud!"
Swiftcloud's throat tightened. She had wanted to be Tulippaw's mentor too. But it wasn't her place to step in and take over the teachings of an apprentice, who's mentor was still alive and very capable of passing on her knowledge. Besides, Ambereye was a

senior warrior. Swiftcloud had barely been a warrior for a few days.

"Then you'll have to take that up with Ambereye and Whitestar later." Swiftcloud meowed, trying to sound stern. She couldn't make a decision like this. She was hardly more than an apprentice herself, Tulippaw had to understand. With a huff, the little brown molly stood up, padding over to Ambereye who waited for her by the bramble barrier. Swiftcloud looked over, seeing the sad, yet sympathetic look on Ambereye's face. She too seemed to know the younger cat wanted another to teach her. Swiftcloud lowered her ears guiltily, turning as she heard someone mewl for her attention.

"Hey, Swiftcloud," Chicorynose greeted as she approached, her younger sister right behind her. "Care to accompany me and Quailbelly on a patrol? Ambereye and Tuilppaw can come too." Swiftcloud perked up at the offer. *She must have overheard my conversation with Tulippaw.*

"I'd love to," Swiftcloud purred, trotting over to the awaiting she-cats. Tulippaw trilled with excitement, running around Swiftcloud as the other two mollies followed after her. Ambereye simply gave her head a shake, leading the others out of camp.
This was going to be an awkward patrol at best, at worst it would be dangerous. A sneaking suspicion crept upon Swiftcloud like a scheming fox as the five she-cats walked down the hill. No doubt they would be visiting the Forest Patch. What would be awaiting them there upon this visit, she wondered. Sharp claws of dread scraped her heart the closer they drew to the woods. No other cat seemed to be so bothered by the visit, however. At least not outwardly. Chicorynose had taken lead of the patrol by now, flanked by Ambereye. The two she-cats chatted idly as they padded forward, their voices soft and calm. No hint of worry laced either's mew. Quailbelly brought up the rear of the group, keeping an eye on the ever playful Tulippaw who zigzagged around her young aunt. *Maybe I'm stressing too much,* Swiftcloud swallowed back a sigh.

"Swiftcloud!" Tulippaw piped, bringing her attention to the white and black patched molly. She rounded her, dropping into a playful crouch for a moment before springing back up on her paws. "Race you to the border!" She challenged, taking off before Swiftcloud

could say anything.

"Tulippaw, wait!" Ambereye caterwauled, only to be ignored. Chicorynose shook her head beside her. Swiftcloud pushed on her back legs to bolt forward and after the wayward apprentice. She pelted at full speed, twisting around trees and leaping over fallen twigs to keep herself from being tripped up. The younger brown and white molly was within her sights, almost in paw's reach.

"You won't win!" Tulippaw taunted as she glanced back at the warrior on her heels.

"Tulippaw, this is no time for games" Swiftcloud hissed. Tulippaw simply laughed, leaping in the air gleefully.
"You're too close to the border!" Swiftcloud warned. But her yowl came too late. When Tulippaw had finally come to a stop, she was well past the barrier, at least a bearlength into Treeclan's territory. Swiftcloud's pelt bristled with worry. As she parted her jaws to yowl out again a familiar stench flew into her scent glands on the breeze. Four Treeclan warriors leaped down from the canopy instantaneously, surrounding Tuilppaw. The scent Swiftcloud had caught had alluded to more cats than this, but she found herself the slightest bit relieved to be wrong. Still, this was a dangerous affair. Despite the situation, and her clanmate's fear, Tulippaw showed no such emotion. The fur along her spine rose defensively, back arching to make her appear larger than she actually was.

"Treeclan scum, leave me alone!" She growled. A warrior lifted a paw and slapped her across the muzzle with his claws.

"Disrespectful kit!" He snarled. Tulippaw merely spat at him, still unphased.

"Tulippaw!" Swiftcloud called out, gaining the warriors' attention just as the rest of the Grassclan patrol caught up to her.

"Let the apprentice go, Beetlenose," Chicorynose hissed, lashing her tail. Beetlenose-the tom who had scratched Tuilppaw-turned to smirk at the angered deputy. He flicked his tail, prompting another warrior to grab Tulippaw and press her against the ground with his weight. The young apprentice struggled in the massive grey smoke

tom's grasp. Swiftcloud grew more tense, ready to charge across the border to snatch the now helpless cat away.

"She's trespassed on our territory, I think we have the right to punish her as we see fit," Beetlenose purred malevolently.
Quailbelly walked to stand at Swiftcloud's side, her eyes narrowed to slits. She looked as ready to launch herself at the enemy warriors as Swiftcloud did.

"But she belongs to *our* clan. She is my responsibility. And as deputy I plan to punish her accordingly for her crime. This is Grassclan's matter, not yours. Let Tulippaw go."

"It became Treeclan's matter the heartbeat this little mouse crossed the scent markers," hissed a pure black she-cat, her cold blue eyes filled with malice. Swiftcloud instantly recognized this cat. It was Nightshade, the troublesome warrior seemed to have it out for Swiftcloud, who was growing sick of her attitude by this point.
"She's our prisoner now."
Chicorynose's pelt fluffed up at the she-cat's disobedience. Her tail lashed violently, lips drawing back in a snarl. Clearly, she wasn't willing to allow one of her clanmates to become a prisoner of war. Especially not her niece. Chicorynose glanced at her patrol, flicking her ear and tilting her head at once. *An order to attack!* At her command, the Grassclan mollies threw themselves across the border and towards the opposing Treeclan warriors. Each cat took on another. Quailbelly swiped at and pushed Beetlenose over, tussling in the leaf litter with him. Swiftcloud found herself up against the giant grey smoke tom who held onto Tulippaw. She headbutted into his flank, lifting a paw to claw at his face. The tom flinched, moving just enough to allow Tulippaw to slip away.

"Run home Tulippaw, get backup!" Swiftcloud commanded just as she was knocked to the ground. Tulippaw looked ready to help fend off the warrior who attacked the white and black she-cat, but Swiftcloud was reluctant to accept her assistance.
"*Go!"*
As she yowled out again, Tulippaw gave her a nod, darting off back to the proper side of the border, and out of sight. Now Swiftcloud could give her full attention to the abrassive tom.

"Make that kittypet wish she was never born, Fogbreath!" Goaded Nightshade, dodging a blow from Chicorynose. Fobreath turned his sights down to Swiftcloud. He pushed his weight onto her, lifting a paw to strike. But Swiftcloud was faster than he was. Kicking up into the fluffy tom's underbelly with her back legs, Swiftcloud tore at him. Her claws made it past his thick pelt, meeting with delicate skin and ripping it open. A few trickles of blood dripped down her legs just as the tom jumped back with a yowl. She hadn't badly wounded him, but at least now he'd have some scratches to nurse for a few days. *That's what you get for messing with Tulippaw*.
Fogbreath let out a fierce hiss as Swiftcloud pushed herself back onto her paws. Out of nowhere, many cats leapt down from the treetops and into the battle. It would seem Thornberry-Treeclan's deputy-was leading this attack. *Wait, is this a trap?! I knew I smelled more than four cats!* Swiftcloud whipped her head from side to side, feeling overwhelmed. Was all of this planned?
There was no time to think this over more or ask any questions. A new pair of warriors was already upon her, backing Swiftcloud against a fallen log. Swiftcloud's eyes darted between her pursuers-two cats named Leafheart and Embersong-and over towards her clanmates. Chicorynose was in a standoff with Thornberry, Nightshade at the tom's heels. Quailbelly was fending herself against Beetlenose, Pepperpatch, and Bluefang. Ambereye stood on top of Shadeleaf, pummeling her while a tom called Foxstrike dealt blows to her shoulder. The Grassclan patrol was completely outmatched and outnumbered. *There's no way we can take them all!*
Luckily, the patrol was no longer in this fight. It felt like no time at all before reinforcements arrived to help. Most of Grassclan's warriors had been brought to the battle, as well as Tulippaw, and Whitestar. Shadowfang pushed his way past a few Treeclan warriors, headbutting Leafheart out of the way to reach Swiftcloud. Swiftcloud sprang forward to stand at his side, pressing her rear to his and turning in the opposite direction he was facing.

"I've got your back," she meowed. Shadowfang smirked.

"Well I've got yours first!" He lashed out at Leafheart who had come back to retaliate against him. Swiftcloud ducked as Embersong leaped to scratch her, turning around to knock the dilute calico she-cat off her paws. Embersong let out a fierce yowl, flipping around

quickly to strike out at Swiftcloud again. Swiftcloud swung a paw at the molly in return, missing her muzzle by a whisker. Meanwhile, Embersong managed to snag a good bit of her shoulder, creating a few bloody cuts and pulling out a tuft of fur. *Rabbit-dung! This is why I'm not a Fighting Warrior...* Swiftcloud countered, despite the pain, slashing Embersong's ear. She tore it good, leaving a good nick or two in the cartilage. Embersong yowled, eyes blazing with fury. She charged, blinded by her anger, making it easier for Swiftcloud to defend herself. She tripped the calico she-cat again, causing her to slam against the log as she came down. She hit her head hard, standing back up with effort. One eye closed, she looked ready to collapse. She called to Leafheart, taking the she-cat with her as she fled into the crowd. Swiftcloud had won this fight, but doubted that would be the last she'd see of them today. She regrouped with Shadowfang, following his lead into the crowd this time. The pair came to rest at some point near the heart of the battlefield, panting.

"Thornberry!" Swiftcloud heard Chicorynose yowl. "I can't believe you would stoop so low. Capturing an apprentice? All as a ploy to ambush an innocent patrol?"

Thornberry rolled his eyes, wiggling his fluffy, nubby tail. The deputies were locked in a standoff, circling each other in the center of the battlefield. "All's fair in love and war, Chicorynose."

"What would you have done if Tulippaw had not strayed past the border, then? Walk along the tree branches past our scent markers and ambush an unsuspecting patrol?"

"Our orders are mostly classified. But I won't beat around the bush either, my patrol had come to claim back the Forest Patch," Thornberry confessed with little remorse for what he and his clan had come to do.

"Claim *back*? But the Forest Patch was given to us as a sign of peace by Ravenstar the Wise!"
Thornberry crouched down, tilting his head briefly towards the fighting going on in the surrounding crowd.

"Take a look around. Does this look like *peace* to you? Our alliance

has been broken. We have the right to withdraw our peace offering. The forest belongs to Treeclan!"
Chicorynose let out a mighty battle cry, throwing herself at the fluffy tom with the ferocity of a Lionclan warrior. Her paws swung wildly, hitting the other deputy with astonishing accuracy. Though Thornberry was dealing some damage of his own. The fluffy fur along Chicorynose's chest was stained reddish brown, the grass beneath her sticky with blood. Swiftcloud felt a rush of panic for her old mentor as she caught the sight, driving her to spring forward to help. But Shadowfang blocked her path, pushing her back into the frey with him to fight elsewhere. Swiftcloud lost sight of Chicorynose in the crowd. *Starclan grant her strength*, she prayed as she swung around to sink her teeth into an unsuspecting Treeclan warrior. Shadowfang was already busy knocking the cat over, making it easier for Swiftcloud to leave her mark. It wasn't long before the partners had this cat running before they moved onto the next enemy. Swiftcloud spotted a familiar black pelt a foxlength away and flung herself at the cat recklessly, Shadowfang at her heels. *I'll teach you not to mess with a deputy and her patrol!* When the cat Swiftcloud was attacking turned, she found herself surprised it was not Nightshade at all. In fact, this was Nightshade's sister, Batwing. Batwing and Swiftcloud had begun to get along in recent moons, and that made this difficult for her to have to do. They'd come such a long way with learning to become friends, it was a shame to ruin the progress. *She's my friend, but this is a battle. Right now she's my enemy*, she told herself, flashing Batwing an apologetic look before slicing her ear. She kicked her, sending the black she-cat fleeing.

"Nice one, Swift," Shadowfang purred, smiling at her. Swiftcloud turned to give her wounded shoulder a quick lick, the scratches stinging terribly.

"Let's gossip about our victories later, right now I just want this to be over," she replied, tone low and serious. Shadowfang snorted playfully.

"Well alright then, Ms. Serious, lets get back to it." Shadowfang led the way back into the battle, joining in a fight with Whitestar who faced off against three warriors. Embersong was back again, holding

her own against Grassclan's leader. A brown and white tabby she-cat called Tigerlily eyed them, waiting her turn for a chance to face Whitestar. The third cat was a familiar face to Swiftcloud, seemingly unchanged since the last time they'd fought. It was Tinypaw-or Tinystep as she was called now-still little but as fierce as ever. Swiftcloud didn't really understand what had stunted the warrior's growth, but she wasn't about to underestimate her due to her size. Still, Swiftcloud was eager to challenge her. They had a score to settle. Without a moment's hesitantion, Swiftcloud ran up to the tiny warrior, hissing at her to gain her attention. Tinystep whipped around, baring her fangs at the other she-cat before slinking forward. Swiftcloud braced herself, ducking out of the way of Tinystep's needle like claws in the nick of time. She turned like a snake and stuck out a paw, tripping up the enemy warrior. But Tinystep regained her balance before she could fall, jumping upwards to land on Swiftcloud's back. She dug her claws into the already injured shoulder, making Swiftcloud cry out in pain. Her white fur turned red under the gush of blood and Tinystep snickered in her ear.

"You're still weak!"
Swiftcloud growled, flipping over and slamming Tinystep against the ground. She pressed her weight down as the tiny tortoiseshell struggled beneath her, leaving her belly vulnerable. Tigerlily came to help her clanmate now, ready to tear into Swiftcloud's exposed underside. But as she lifted a paw, a black shape rammed into her flank, knocking her over.

"Leave her alone!" Shadowfang spat, pummeling the tabby and white molly. Swiftcloud watched the two tussle for a heartbeat before rolling back onto her paws. Tinystep had worn herself out, panting as she stood up on shaky legs. Swiftcloud knew better than to think less of her in this state, working to knock the little warrior onto her side. She gave Tinystep one good gash along her flank then shoved her away, hissing a warning.

"Get out of here while you can. Before I give you some worse wounds to worry about."
Tinystep's amber eyes glowed with hatred, but the look on her face admitted her defeat. Quick as a mouse she scampered off to the

nearest tree, scaling up the trunk and disappearing from sight. Swiftcloud caterwauled her victory before turning to assist Shadowfang in forcing Tigerlily to flee.
The battlefield had thinned, cats from both clans having been chased off by their enemies. Grassclan had the most warriors on the field now, and with one final yowl all fighting came to a halt. Chicorynose held Thornberry down in the heart of the battlefield, jaws clamped around the deputy's neck. Though she threatened to bite, she did not dare pierce his flesh with her teeth.

"Tr-Treeclan, retreat!" Thornberry choked out, sending his clanmates fleeing into the trees instantly. Chicorynose immediately pulled back, giving the fluffy smoke tom one last swipe before allowing him to scurry away with the rest. Thornberry paused to check and make sure all of his warriors had left before disappearing along with them.

"If war is what Blazestar wants, then it's war that your clan shall have!" Whitestar declared loud enough for the retreating deputy to hear. Chicorynose tilted her head back to lead the warriors in a caterwaul of victory, backing up Whitestar's claim.
"Grassclan, to me," Whitestar meowed, bringing them all towards her to listen to what the leader had to say. "Let's return to camp immediately. We'll all need to heal and rest up as quickly as possible."
Cats nodded along in agreement, turning to follow Chicorynose who led the clan out of the Forest Patch and back home to camp. As they made the trek, Swiftcloud thought hard about what the future now held. This was it. This was the true beginning of the war between Grassclan and Treeclan. She wondered if they should lose, what would happen then? And what if somehow they were victorious?

Chapter 27

Swiftcloud awoke with a start. Blue eyes flew open in a flash, and ears pinned back against her head. Her chest heaved with effort as she tried to catch her breath, calming herself down slowly but surely. The battle from the day before had triggered another nightmare. The third in the past moon.

Last night she had dreamed of a battle, one far more brutal and bloody than any she'd been in before. The reek of the Thunder Path stung her nostrils, despite not having visited the location in moons. She could still taste the metallic tang of blood even though she knew none touched her tongue now. Perhaps that was left over from yesterday's scuffle, but then again, the amount she'd felt she swallowed was in a far greater quantity. Something else from Swiftcloud's dream stuck out to her, even now as she lay awake in her nest. Beyond where she had stood, looming over an enemy warrior, a sight had caught her attention. The haunting image of wide, hollow eyes was seared into her memory. She could not tell who they belonged to, but Swiftcloud felt a strong familiarity when she had looked into them. This cat was someone she cared about, someone important. Yet for the life of her she could not figure out who it was. Swiftcloud preferred it that way.

For a few more heartbeats she lay motionless in her wool and bracken nest, willing the frightful thoughts to the back of her mind. Once she had settled, Swiftcloud rose to her paws, feeling an ache in her bones and a sharp pain in her shoulder. Right, she had been injured in yesterday's fight. A groan managed to escape her throat as she turned her head to sniff at her wound. The webbing which had been patched onto it seemed to be holding up, although Swiftcloud had no doubt that she would need it changed by the time evening rolled around. Still, it wasn't of any concern. She could get along fine through the day without much worry. The only thing she need worry about now was the loud grumble of her empty belly.

Swiftcloud padded slowly out of the boulder which made up the warrior's den, into the half light of a brand new morning. It was barely past dawn, the clearing was mostly void of cats at this time.

Most had gone off on hunting and border patrols, while the rest still slept soundly in their dens.
Among the remaining cats in camp were Whitestar and her family who were spending time by the Tall Stone, their typical hangout spot. Thornkit and Lightkit bounced around the giant boulder, chasing after a little white butterfly which fluttered circles around the pair. It seemed as if it were playing with them by the way it stuck around, yet barely out of the kittens' reach. Whitestar and Tigerfang watched on with amusement, tails twined, tips swaying lightly. Thornkit let out a squeak as Lightkit pounced on top of him, using her brother as a platform to jump higher in the air to swipe at the bug.
Swiftcloud shook her head slowly, chuckling to herself as she stopped by the fresh-kill pile. The sight of happy kits managed to melt away the anxiety which had taken hold of her since waking. Carefully, Swiftcloud picked her way through the remains of the pile, choosing a leftover mole from the last hunt of the previous night. She picked the little morsel up and dropped it at her paws, laying down with it to take the first long awaited bite.

"Hey, Swiftcloud?" Called a familiar voice.
Swiftcloud looked up from her mole, raising her head to address the medicine cat apprentice. She swallowed down the bite she had taken from her breakfast, swiping her pink tongue around her lips.

"Yes, Mistypaw?"

Mistypaw blinked at her, glancing away bashfully. "Would you come with me to gather herbs?" She asked, voice meek.

"I'd love to, but isn't that a Collector's job? Why not ask Frostfeather to go with you, I'm sure she'd be happy to help."
Mistypaw lowered her head shyly. She rolled around a pebble which lay beneath her paw, as if doing so were comforting as she replied.

"She's still asleep. And....I was hoping we could get the chance to talk," she confessed. "Away from the clan. It's been a while since we've gone out together. We can hunt on the way back, if that makes you feel better about coming."
Swiftcloud thought for a heartbeat, dipping her head to take

another irresistible bite of her breakfast.

"Alright, I'll go with you. Just let me finish my fresh-kill first." Mistypaw gave an enthusiastic nod, settling by Swiftcloud's side with legs tucked beneath her. She groomed the white and black patched molly as she patiently waited for her to finish eating. When the mole was nothing more than bones and fur, the leftovers were discarded, and the two she-cats went on their way herb picking. There was a silence between the pair for a while as they searched through the meadow grass. Burdock, comfrey, feverfew, watermint, tansy, and thyme were on the list of herbs to find today. Greenleaf had been hot and dry, making scavenging a little harder. Leaf-fall also did not help matters much, already killing off a lot of the meadow's foliage. But luckily, Mistypaw was well informed of the best places to look first.

"So what did you need to talk about?" Swiftcloud finally plucked up the courage to ask, glancing at Mistypaw as they padded along.

"Well...I've been very anxious lately. I'm very worried for my mom," Mistypaw confessed, ears lowering slightly. He eyes trailed along the grass in front of them, searching for watermint along the riverbank.

"You mean Jaybird?"

Mistypaw nodded her broad head, leading them closer to shore. "The kits are a moon overdue and I'm afraid something may be wrong."

"Maybe its just from stress? We're all pretty worried now that we're at war with Treeclan."

"Perhaps." Mistypaw sighed, "But Cricketsong had her litter last night, and she didn't find out she was expecting until half a moon after my mom was told she was having kits of her own. It just seems so odd that Cricketsong would kit first."

Swiftcloud blinked, surprised. "Cricketsong had her kits?"

Mistypaw gave her a weird look. "Yeah. Three toms and two

mollies. I can't believe you didn't know! She was shrieking louder than a dying fox through the whole kitting."

Swiftcloud twitched her whiskers, focusing her gaze on the ground beneath her paws. "I must have been sleeping heavier than I realized. I was really tired after the battle yesterday."

"Yeah, I can understand. From what I heard you fought pretty hard."

"I did my best, I guess. Not enough to win the war though. I probably could have done better."

"Aw, I don't think you have much to worry about. You should have more faith in your abilities."

Swiftcloud rolled her eyes, "Why? I think I've got plenty of right to worry. The clan is in danger. And I'm nothing more than a spy, and a hunter. How much use can I be?"

Mistypaw swung her head around to look at Swiftcloud, green eyes twinkling with admiration, and a peculiar twinge of hope. "Oh, Swiftcloud. You are so much more important than you know."

Swiftcloud paused her stride, turning her full attention to the other molly. "How can you be so sure?"

"Well..." Mistypaw seemed hesitant to speak, like she knew something but was not allowed to say. "I'm a medicine cat. It's my job to know." She stayed straight faced as she spoke, but a gleam in her pale green eyes revealed some hidden knowing.
Swiftcloud eyed her suspiciously, but Mistypaw held her ground. She flicked her ear, prompting the white and black patched warrior to follow her forward.

"If you say so. Thanks for the confidence in me, Misty. You're a good friend."
Mistypaw seemed to tense slightly at the word "friend", as if she did not like the sound. Swiftcloud caught onto it but was unsure of what to say in response. Was she was supposed to be sorry that she saw Mistypaw as her close friend? Or did Mistypaw hope that they were more? How would she even go about finding such things out,

Swiftcloud wondered. And how would she handle it if she found out that their relationship in fact *could* be more?
A loud chorus of howls broke the silence between them, causing Swiftcloud to freeze in place once again. It was not far from here that she and Shadowfang had been attacked by a fox two moons ago. Hearing the sound of predators nearby the same location made the white and black patched molly that much more anxious.

"What's that sound..?" She whispered, fur prickling. Mistypaw perked her ears, shutting her eyes to have a better listen.

"Those are wolves." She blinked open her eyes. "They aren't anywhere nearby now, even if they sound like it. A whole pack can make themselves appear much closer than they actually are, when howling in unison like that."

"How do you know about them?" Swiftcloud questioned.

"Goldensong told me. Leafbare is the time when they migrate from the mountains to the hills and meadow in search of better hunting. But they never come close to the clan. I suppose Leaf-fall is when they begin their journey here."

Swiftcloud swallowed down a lump which had formed in her throat. "Are you sure they won't bother us?" She fretted, needing the reassurance. Mistypaw nodded, bringing herself close to the other molly to press her fluffy body into hers.

"Yes. Clan cats are too much trouble for wolves to consider hunting. One would have to be pretty desperate to come close to a clan. Still, when we return to camp we should probably report this to Whitestar. Just to be safe."

Swiftcloud nodded slightly. "Y-yeah.... Maybe we should just collect those herbs now and head back home. I'll go hunting with Shadowfang later. I'd rather not be out here too long, even if those wolves aren't coming near us."

Mistypaw let out a soft chuckle, rubbing her cheek against Swiftcloud's with a purr. "Whatever you are most comfortable with. Let's keep moving."

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A familiar scene unfolded as Swiftcloud made her way back through the bramble barrier, Mistypaw at her heels. Cats gathered around the nursery which echoed with the agonizing wails of a kitting she-cat. *Sounds like Jaybird!* Swiftcloud and Mistypaw looked at one another before the light silver she-cat passed on her herbs, darting into the crowd and shouldering her way past their clanmates. She disappeared beneath the honeysuckle bush with a quickness, her form swallowed up by the branches and crowd in the blink of an eye. Swiftcloud trotted over to the medicine den, slipping inside to drop off the bundles she carried into a corner for the healer to find later. Then she reemerged, taking herself to the nursery, maneuvering past cats to make her way to the front. She seated herself beside the new mother, Cricketsong. Her light tabby face was twisted with worry, tail tip twitching with nervousness. A glance at her belly revealed flab where plumpness used to be. *She really must have kitted last night.* Perhaps that was why Cricketsong seemed so anxious now? She was being kept away from her newborns so the cats inside would have room. But Swiftcloud didn't want to make assumptions. And she was awfully curious about what was going on.

"What's wrong, Cricketsong?" Swiftcloud decided to ask.

"This is Jaybird's first kitting. She has never had to deal with such awful pain, she's only watched. But she insisted that she carry her kits this time, rather than adopt again," Cricketsong mewed in response. *First kitting?* Did that mean Mistypaw, Rabbitstorm, and Frostfeather weren't biologically related to the queen? But they looked so much like her, how was it possible that they weren't actually kin? Swiftcloud gave her pelt a shake, mentally chiding herself for thinking this discovery to be so wrong. They were still a family, related or not. Jaybird had devoted her life to raising those cats. They were as much her babies as the ones she was having right now.
"But there's something wrong, I know there is!" the queen piped again, whiskers trembling. Cowpatch made his way through the crowd to sit by her other side, comforting her as she went on to mew more woes.

The sharp scent of blood struck Swiftcloud's nose, causing the fur along her shoulders to rise. Was Jaybird bleeding? Was she alright? Were the kits alright? Swiftcloud wanted to see what was going on, inchworming her way closer to the entrance of the nursery. Ambereye stood as still as a stone in front of it; the only signs of her being real was the lifting of her tail to deny the warrior entry, and the rapid heaving of her sleek amber sides. She was hyperventilating, appearing more terrified than a rabbit being chased across the fields. Her fearscent blended with the other smells emanating from the nursery- herbs, milk, bodily fluids, blood- making a powerful concoction of odor. Swiftcloud had to resist the urge to pull away, her curiosity and worry keeping her firmly planted in place. She narrowed her eyes, trying to get a good view of the scene inside.
Within the nursery's depts lay a flailing silver tabby shape. Jaybird's teeth were clamped tight around a stick her hind legs splayed outward, back claws extended as far as they could reach. Goldensong and Mistypaw sat by the queen's rear. Mistypaw's thick paws ran along the pregnant molly's flank as if turning and guiding something forward. Goldensong watched Jaybird's rear attentively as a shape made its way into the wool. Meanwhile, Snowfrost sat by Jaybird's head, her plumed tail brushing against her sister's muzzle. Jaybird seemed to find comfort in this, lifting her chin to nuzzle into the soft silver and white faded fur. Much to Swiftcloud's surprise, Snowfrost wasn't doing much to help at all except keeping Jaybird calm. She didn't so much as flex a claw to touch the herbs laying by the queen's nose. Swiftcloud guessed she must eat those in order to save herself and her kits. But why wasn't Snowfrost doing anything? The silver lynx point molly's gaze seemed fixed upon the other two medicine cats. For a few heartbeats her eyes were soft, glowing with pride as they rested on Mistypaw. But as her icy blue orbs traveled onto Goldensong they held more negative emotions. Neither of her denmates seemed to take notice, however, far too busy in their work. Goldensong busied herself furiously licking a pair of slimy looking bundles while Mistypaw took cobwebs and moss to dab away the blood seeping from Jaybird's rear. The apprentice's muzzle was distorted into a twisted expression of concern and determination.

"Come on, mama, just one more push!" She encouraged. Goldensong

abandoned the task she was handling to nose the stick out from Jaybird's jaws. She shouldered Snowfrost aside, pushing the herbs laying in the nest closer to her patient. She picked up the leaves and other medicines with her claws, pushing them into Jaybird's mouth. Goldensong helped her to chew. Jaybird's nose wrinkled in disgust; she looked about ready to spit the herbs back out. But Goldensong prevented her from doing so, talking her through it.

"You need those herbs, you've lost a lot of blood," she told her. "You need them to keep strong. So that you can be with your kits, and nurse them. You're doing great, just stay with us, Jaybird, alright?" Jaybird let out a whine but nodded weakly, tears pooling at the edges of her pretty blue eyes. She swallowed down the herbs harshly, parting her jaws to pant. Goldensong returned to her post, allowing Snowfrost to move back over to her sister's head. Snowfrost once again leered at the other medicine cat before turning her head to look down at Jaybird. Jaybird pushed her head against Snowfrost's thigh, crying and wailing out as a spasm rippled across her body. Snowfrost bent around to press her forehead against her sister's in an act of love Swiftcloud had never seen her do before.

"Congratulations. You have four healthy-and rather large-kits. Three mollykits and a tom!"
Mistypaw trilled once Jaybird has squeezed out the last slimy kit. The apprentice's green eyes were lit up with exhilaration and Snowfrost rose to her paws to stand by her side. The lynx point molly pressed herself into her fluffy niece's flank, purring so loud even Swiftcloud could hear.

"Did you see how well she did, Goldensong?" Snowfrost praised. Goldensong nodded as she placed Jaybird's new litter by the exhausted queen's belly to suckle.

"She handled it like a true medicine cat. Not many apprentices could handle the stress of assisting two queens through their kittings in such a short time."

Snowfrost swished her tail in delight. "You are very right about that. You know what? I believe Mistypaw is about ready to earn her name."

Goldensong stiffened for a heartbeat, leering at her old mentor.

"Perhaps so." Goldensong took another moment to pause. "It wouldn't hurt to give her another moon or two of training. However, I wouldn't want to tease an apprentice with the promise of earning their full name and not follow through." Mistypaw's face lit up. Snowfrost scowled at Goldensong's remark, as if the comment was offensive in some way, or perhaps like a personal attack. Goldensong shot her back a look which tempted her to make a spiteful remark. Goldensong may be a medicine cat, but she wasn't afraid to get in a verbal fight. Snowfrost dismissed herself from the makings of the feud, returning to her sister. She laid down by her side, tucking her legs beneath her. Her narrow head moved to brush against Jaybird's cheek.

"You did wonderful, Jayjay," she whispered. "Your kits are very lovely."

Jaybird smiled weakly, eyes half lidded with exhaustion. "Thank you, Snow," she rasped, voice hardly louder than her littermate's. "I think...I think I may name one of them after our mother."

Snowfrost purred, rasping her tongue over her sister's forehead. "I'm sure she would love that."

"I will give another...the name I had chosen for the kit I never got to raise. It would be a shame to let it go to waste."
Snowfrost froze, pulling away slowly. Her loving gaze dissolved into one of pain, and another emotion Swiftcloud could not pin down. Anger, perhaps? Resentment? But why would Snowfrost feel that way? It hadn't even been her kit. It was the fourth from Mistypaw's litter; perhaps the feelings were due to the fact that the kitten had mysteriously disappeared? Swiftcloud shook off the thought. It wasn't her business to know. Still, she couldn't shake the new feeling that had began to gnaw at her belly. Like something was wrong.

"That would be nice, too," Snowfrost managed to choke out. At once, she pulled away altogether, rising to her paws. "I will come check on you again in a little while, with a fresh wad of herbs. Let Ashwhisker know if you feel yourself beginning to bleed again, or if

you are in any pain."
Jaybird nodded slightly.

"Yes, I will. Thank you again, Snowfrost."
And with that, Snowfrost turned and stalked out of the nursery. Swiftcloud stepped back to allow the medicine cat through, while Snowfrost basically pushed Ambereye out of the way to get past. The stiff bodied warrior let out a hiss as she regained her balance.

"Watch it!" She growled as she whipped around.

"Your kits are here. You may go in and see them now." Snowfrost's voice came out sounding more hollow than it probably should. She didn't seem to care that she'd basically knocked the warrior over. Yet Ambereye seemed to get over her annoyance quickly. Upon the healer's word she turned and slipped into the nursery, no doubt to be at her mate's side.
Meanwhile, Snowfrost skulked past, head lowered slightly. As cats began to walk away from the nursery, they shot her glares, ones of which Swiftcloud could only guess were looks of mistrust. Why cats would look at Snowfrost that way, Swiftcloud did not know. Perhaps she was misreading them. Or perhaps the clan really did not trust Snowfrost as much as she'd initially thought. Still, it was peculiar. Swiftcloud too found herself turning to leave, brushing past a few cats who had been kept away from the nursery. Rosebloom and her litter padded back to their den, ducking under the honeysuckle bush to settle down for an afternoon nap. A trio of high pitch noises came from the direction, and Swiftcloud could only assume it was Thistlekit, Seedkit, and Pansykit squealing at the sight of their new denmates. No doubt the seven of them would have fun playing together when Jaybird's litter grew big enough. Just the thought alone brought a warmth to Swiftcloud's heart. Even in such a difficult time of war and loss, life renewed. The birth of kits promised a new future. Perhaps one without such violence.

Chapter 28

Cool grey clouds greeted Swiftcloud as she emerged from the warrior's den the next day. The chill from the night before had given way to a humid morning, the air thick enough to make a cat's pelt heavy with moisture. Swiftcloud gave herself a good shake and a yawn as she padded over to the fresh-kill pile. The smell of freshly caught prey danced into her nose, tempting her to come and have a bite to eat. As she searched through the pile for something particularly tasty, a mew rung out at her.

"Swiftcloud!" Frostfeather trilled, padding over to the pile with a bounce in her step. A gopher hung limply from her jaws. She dropped it at her paws, beaming at the white and black patched warrior.

"Morning," Swiftcloud greeted. "What's up?"

"I just returned from a patrol. I saw this gopher lounging in the sun and decided to catch the lazy little thing. It was waaay too easy! Maybe I'm not a hunting warrior, but when prey practically falls at my paws, how can I resist?" She purred. "I think I'll take it to Jaybird. Would you like to come with me? I'm sure you haven't seen the kits yet."

Swiftcloud lit up. "Sure! I think I'll take something for the other queens to eat as well."

"Nah, don't bother. Pollenpaw and Lilacpaw handled that earlier, just bring something for the two of us to share."

Swiftcloud nodded, going back to dig through the pile again. She picked up a young hare, jerking her muzzle in the direction of the nursery once she secured it in her jaws. Together, the two she-cats walked to the honeysuckle bush, each slipping beneath to pay Jaybird a visit. Frostfeather had been right, the other queens did all have something to eat. Ashwhisker and Cricketsong were sharing a pheasant, half the carcass already devoured by the two needy

queens. Rosebloom nibbled on the leg of a rabbit while Thistlekit, Pansykit, and Seedkit tore into its meaty side. The three kittens had nearly tripled in size, almost as large as Cricketsong's first litter now. They would be made apprentices soon. Jaybird laid on her side in her nest, her front half bent around her belly to nose at her newborns who fussed as she guided each of them closer to herself. She still seemed tired, but it was clear some energy had returned to her at last. The bones of a tiny mouse lay a tail-length away, but a small grumble told Swiftcloud the queen was still hungry. Frostfeather gently placed her gopher in front of her mother, pushing it closer with a paw.

"Hi, mama," she purred. "I caught this for you!"
Jaybird whipped her head around to look up at her adult kit, a tired, but grateful smile twisting up her muzzle.

"Thank you, precious," she responded, taking the prey and pulling it closer to eat.

"I brought Swiftcloud to meet the kits, and we thought we'd have breakfast with you."

"Oh how nice, bunny. Please, have a seat, both of you."
Swiftcloud and Frostfeather took the queen's invitation, sitting and pulling their hare forward. The warriors began to eat their breakfast while the queens chatted among themselves around them. Thistlekit and Pansykit wrestled along the wool lined floor while Seedkit cheered his sisters on. Cricketsong washed her new litter between talking, causing the five of them mewl. Jaybird's kits were busy suckling as the queen enjoyed her gopher.
All the new kits were so tiny, Swiftcloud noted. She wondered how she had ever been so small. Glancing over gave her the opportunity to observe the newest additions to Grassclan. Two of Jaybird's kits were the spitting image of their mother, fur silver and tabby striped. The third was a duller gray, with large black stripes. The fourth kit was a pretty blue-gray color, his pelt unlike any in the clan. He did not possess a single stripe on his tiny body, unlike his sisters had, though his ears seemed as big as a typical Grassclan kit. Though that was unlike his sisters too, who had smaller, more pointed ears. For a heartbeat Swiftcloud wondered if the cat who had sired them was another clan cat, or someone beyond the Land's

Star. Though it didn't matter, the clan would love them all the same.

"It's nice to have the nursery so full of kits," Rosebloom deadpanned to no one in particular, grooming between the toes of her front paw.

"It'll get roomier soon," Swiftcloud couldn't help but chime. "Your kits are going to be 'Paws in a few days, right?"

"Yes that's right. They're growing up so fast, aren't they?"

"Mhm! And Ashwhisker, your litter is due within the next half moon isn't it?"

"That's correct," answered Ashwhisker with an excited grin. It had been a few moons since Swiftcloud's punishment of nursery duty had ended, but she still enjoyed keeping up with the queens. Every single one was lovely to talk to, and Swiftcloud had to admit she didn't mind playing kitsitter. She was probably as excited about the new litters as the parents were. Kits were fun to be around, and their arrival promised a bright future for the clan.
"So, Swiftcloud," Ashwhisker called. Swiftcloud turned her head to address the Den Mother. "How long til we see you in here with a litter, hm?" The tom asked "I'd love to have some grandkits." Swiftcloud's pelt flushed hot with embarrassment, eyes growing wide. She parted her jaws, trying to form words to speak what was on her mind. But all she managed to spew out were half sentences.

"Wha..? The-there's not...I-I'm! Shadow- we-we're only...Oh Starclan...." She dipped her head in defeat. Ashwhisker chuckled.

"Relax, I'm just pulling your tail. I know you're not ready yet. You're young, you've got your whole life ahead of you. Still, I'd at least like to see you get with my son."

"Oh..oh, no. Shadowfang and I are just friends! He's my best friend; we like to joke around and stuff. We don't really..." She trailed off.

"Oh, come now. I see the way you two look at each other. I know you have feelings for my Shadowfang. And Shadowfang thinks the

world of you, you know. Why not make it official? Rabbitstorm and Heatherwing are obviously an item. And Frostfeather already announced her relationship with Quailbelly."

"Its true." Frostfeather purred fondly. "I'm in love with the most beautiful she-cat in Grassclan, and I'm not ashamed to let everyone know it!"

"It's not that I'm ashamed," Swiftcloud countered, shuffling her paws. "I'm still trying to figure out how I feel, I guess..."

"Oh yeah, Shadowfang isn't the only cat you're mooning over, is he?" Frostfeather asked teasingly.

"You like Mistypaw as well, don't you?" Jaybird chimed, voice light with interest. As tired as she was, she still wanted to get in on the gossip. Especially since it involved one of her kits. "Mistypaw certainly seems to be interested in you."

"Isn't that against the Medicine Cat's Code?" Rosebloom worried as she groomed Seedkit.

"A medicine cat can take a mate," Jaybird explained, "as long as they do not sire or conceive a litter of kits before having a fully trained apprentice. Only then is it breaking The Code. Which means Mistypaw is free to be with whomever she pleases. Once she receives her name at half-moon, that is."

"Oh yes! I'd almost forgotten Goldensong promised to give her her name soon. Do you know what it'll be, Jaybird?" Cricketsong wondered with a swish of her tabby tail.

"Hm, I'm not quite sure, but I have my theories. I think Mistyheart would be a beautiful name. However, I feel as though that's not something completely fitting for my little kit. Perhaps she will be named something like Mistyflame or Mistypath. Those would be best, I'd say. And they are quite lovely too. Though, I don't really care what name she receives, as long as she is happy."

"Speaking of names," Swiftcloud piped, "did you have any in mind for your kits yet? I overheard you telling Snowfrost about some

yesterday, but I didn't quite catch what the names were."

Jaybird purred. "Oh, yes. I have many names in mind for my kits. One of which being for my mother; her name was Cinderthorn. She was the best. Although, she died when Snowfrost and I were young. She was the Den Mother at the time, before Ashwhisker, and Cricketsong's mother Posytail."

"And the other name?" Swiftcloud asked, moving close to whisper in the queen's ear. "I heard you mention you wanted to give a kit the name that you had planned for the one that went missing."

Jaybird nodded as Swiftcloud took a pace back. "The other name I have in mind is Mintkit. I think its a pretty name. And it will also be in honor of a former queen of ours."

"Mintsnout," Rosebloom mewed, "she was one of my mothers."

"For now, though, I have time to think about names. It will be two moons before these precious babies are ready to be introduced to the clan." Jaybird brushed her tail gently against her kittens who seemed to snuggle closer to her in response. They were asleep now, oblivious to the world around them. Frostfeather let out a tiny aww, giggling at the kittens' adorableness.

"I can't wait to have kits of my own." She sighed dreamily.
Swiftcloud looked at her in reply.

"You want kits? Already?"

"Well yeah. Quailbelly and I have been talking about it for a few moons now. We want to adopt a whole litter if possible. And we'll take turns in the nursery so our kits will be raised equally between us."
Jaybird purred with pride, looking at her daughter in approval.

"Thats beautiful, bunny," she praised.
A rustle by the den's entrance drew the nursery cats' attention, silencing conversation. From the branches emerged Cowpatch, Ambereye, and Gingerstrike, bright eyed and smiling. Cowpatch dipped his head respectfully to the queens, trotting over to settle

himself down in Cricketsong's nest beside his mate. Cricketsong turned her head, bumping her muzzle against her mate's affectionately. Cowpatch blinked at her lovingly, dipping his head to check on their newest litter. He smiled and nuzzled each kit, causing them to mewl once more.

"Look over here!" Ambereye urged with pride, padding across the den. She rounded Jaybird's nest, seating herself behind her mate. Tilting her head forward she pressed a cheek to hers, purring as she looked down at her belly. "These are our kits. Aren't they beautiful?"
The amber warrior's eyes flicked from the kittens onto her brother, seeming to glow with pride. Gingerstrike stepped up, lowering his head to get a better look at the kits. The solid grey kit turned in his spot, yawning and stretching out tiny limbs before settling back down. One sister wiggled beside him, using his head as a cushion for her bottom. Gingerstrike purred, lifting his muzzle again.

"They are," he agreed. "And they're so small."

"You were that small once, Gingy," Ambereye teased. "And your kits will be, too."

"Stars, don't remind me…" The tom sighed, giving his pelt a shake.

Jaybird perked up, ready to get in on some new gossip. "Are things not working out between you and your little Treeclan lover?" The slightest hint of bitterness made a presence in her mew, like she was willing to form a grudge against whoever may dare cause problems for Gingerstrike.

"Oh, Magpietail isn't my lover," Gingerstrike admitted, coiling his tail. "And the kits she's carrying aren't technically mine either."

"Wait, what do you mean?" Cricketsong chimed in, just as curious as her best friend to hear some juicy news.

"They're her brother's kits," Gingerstrike elaborated. "Magpietail admitted to wanting to be my mate, but after some discussion we decided that we're better off as friends. However, we agreed to help Smokecloud and his mate have a litter."

Swiftcloud's tail wiggled with interest. She hadn't known Magpietail and Gingerstrike had grown so close, yet alone enough to consider the possibility of becoming mates. She recalled a time from a few moons back when Magpietail had snuck from the trees just to see the ruddy tom. How hadn't it been obvious before? Of course they would catch feelings, sneaking across borders just to spend time together. It was romantic in a way, Swiftcloud realized. But she had to agree with the decision they had reached. She knew such romance personally wouldn't be her thing. She wouldn't be able to stand living a world apart from a cat she found to be appealing. Swiftcloud supposed that's how Gingerstrike and Magpietail felt. Heat suddenly began to prickle Swiftcloud's pelt as she realized perhaps that had been part of her motivation for joining Grassclan those couple seasons ago. She didn't want to be so far from Shadowfang. The allure of clanlife had hooked her to begin with, but Shadowfang's handsomeness and charm had been what truly reeled her in. Had it not been for him, Swiftcloud would have kept her thought that wildcats were savages, just as Gem and Max had described. Perhaps as a result, she wouldn't be sitting here today. How much different would her life be if she had chosen to remain a kittypet instead of following the cute black tom home? Would she be alone? Would she have started to fancy a cat in her neighborhood instead? Or perhaps her Twoleg would have brought home a tom for her to breed with, like what had been the case for her parents. Swiftcloud didn't know what her fate may have been, and honestly she felt better not knowing. She was happy, that's all that mattered.

"So if Magpietail's kits don't belong to you, why do you sound so distressed over them?" asked Cricketsong.

"I'm scared for the kits' safety. Leafbare is right around the corner, and the thought of those helpless, tiny scraps suffering from the cold or illness is frightening." Gingerstrike answered.

"I'm sure they will be alright, bunny. From what I hear, Treeclan has a very warm nursery. The trees work to keep the winds at bay, unlike on our territory where we don't have as much shelter. And you never know, maybe the kits will inherit Magpietail's thick coat. They'll be alright," Jaybird assured.

"That's not the only thing I'm worried about though." Gingerstrike layed down to bury his nose into one of his newborn nieces' pelt. He drew in the little one's scent probably using it to calm himself down. "It's also this war. What if Magpietail gets hurt in a battle, or she kits early because of the stress? And what if Smokecloud is too distracted with his duties to raise the litter? There's hardly time to think anymore, for any cat. And we never even have time to heal before the next battle. Just look at my eye for example! Treeclan warriors have spoiled my looks for good with this scar. What happens if Magpietai lor Smokecloud become more injured than me?"
Swiftcloud narrowed her eyes in an attempt to get a better look. Claw marks ran over Gingerstrike's eye, rough and jagged, looking to have been reopened more than once. Luckily the wound seemed to be closed now, but there was no denying those marks would not fade anytime soon.

"D'aww, if you ask me, I think the scar makes you look cooler!" Ambereye piped, a wide set grin gracing her muzzle. Gingerstrike stuck his muzzle into the air dramatically, his voice higher pitched in an effort to sound comical.

"Hmph, well I didn't ask you! And that's besides the point"
In an instant Ambereye moved to be in better reach of her little brother, batting at him with a paw. Gingerstrike squealed, standing with a whisk of his tail.

"I think it's best to leave the worrying in Treeclan's paws, Gingerstrike. I know you're concerned about your friends, but I'm certain everything will be alright. They have a good support system to back them up," Ashwhisker mewed to the younger tom calmly, his voice smooth and certain.

"Thank you, Ashwhisker." Gingerstrike dipped his head respectfully to the Den Mother, his tension seeming to ease. Ambereye chuckled, copying her brother's words in a mocking tone while making a silly face. Gingerstrike growled playfully, approaching to swipe at her ears. Ambereye ducked his blow, leaping over her mate to jump onto and pin the younger tom down. Rosebloom moved out of the way, a part of her nest becoming a casualty of the siblings' sudden play fight.

"Alright, alright, enough of all this. I need to get back out and see what else can be done today. Maybe I'll be needed on another patrol," Gingerstrike meowed with a laugh, shoving his older sister off of himself with effort.

"I better go too," Swiftcloud realized, jumping to her paws. As much as she loved spending time with the queens and Frostfeather, she knew she had duties to attend to. Perhaps she'd ask Whitestar if she'd like her to go out with some Spy warriors to investigate the Forest Patch.

"Oh must you?" Jaybird sounded disappointed.

"I think at this point it's for the best," Cricketsong reasoned on their behalf, holding back a purr of amusement. Swiftcloud nodded in agreement, which made Jaybird sigh.

"Well, alright. Thanks for stopping by, you two. Be careful out there."

"We will. Thanks, Jaybird. And thanks for letting us meet your kits!" With that, the warriors turned and left the den, ready to be put to work.

Chapter 29

A quarter moon passed, with much happening within that short amount of time. There'd been another border attack. A bad one. Chicorynose had come back from the battle with a badly wounded hind leg. Ladybugbite had her ear ripped in two places. Ambereye has a few scratches along her flanks. And many more cats from the patrol had returned covered in injuries, mostly located on their backs, shoulders, and faces. Swiftcloud was no different. Her shoulder had been cut into again, and her flanks stung from scratches delt by a large Treeclan Fighter. She felt lucky that she wasn't more worse off. She was able to be treated quickly not long after returning to camp. Sadly she could not say the same about her partner. Shadowfang had faced the brunt of the attack brought on the pair. He had been knocked over numerous times, pummeled by two warriors twice his size. Try as she might to get to the tom, Swiftcloud was kept away from assisting. A third cat had fought to keep her back, and by the time she'd managed to defeat them and reach Shadowfang, Chicorynose was calling a retreat. It seemed to Swiftcloud that an above ground ambush wasn't the only strategy Treeclan had come up with. It seemed cats were deliberately driving Grassclan warriors away from their partners. They must have known separating cats would leave them more vulnerable. *Foxhearts*.

Swiftcloud let out a snort, shaking out her pelt to rid herself from the memories of the fight. It was over. Now was a time to think about recovery. Speaking of recovery, Swiftcloud was eager to see how Shadowfang was doing. As she turned to visit the medicine den, the clan's newest apprentices were just coming through the bramble tunnel. Pansypaw and Thistlepaw jumped over each other, batting one another's ears playfully while their respective mentors, Frostfeather and Quailbelly, watched on. Seedpaw was the more calm of the three, jaws shut around a mole he had no doubt caught on his own at last. Bumblethroat followed the little tom through, meowing some encouraging words Swiftcloud didn't bother to listen to. Wherever the six of them had been, it was clear none knew about the battle that had just been waged.

"Hey, Swiftcloud!" Called Frostfeather, prancing over to the nubby tailed warrior. As she approached, a visible wince left Swiftcloud boggled. Frostfeather took one look at her, then moved her gaze past Swiftcloud to examine today's damage. Her ears lowered, teeth clenching as she let out a sympathetic hiss.
"Sheesh, what happened? Everyone looks beat."

"Treeclan." Swiftcloud sighed. "There was another battle. We lost."

"Oh Starclan," Frostfeather griped, licking her chest fur. "Is any cat badly injured?"

"Well, I'm not too beaten up, thankfully. But Chicorynose has got something going on with her leg. And Shadowfang got his tail handed to him. Cloverpetal, Beetlepatch, and I had to help him walk. I was just about to visit him, do you want to come?"

Frostfeather nodded. "Yeah, sure! Oh, but hang on a heartbeat." She turned around for a moment to address the apprentices who were playfighting behind her.
"Hey you three, why don't you take some fresh-kill to the elders? Afterwards grab a bite to eat for yourselves as a reward, you all did awesome today." With that said, Frostfeather turned around, tail kinked over her back. "Ok, lets go."

"Wow, Frostfeather, you're really taking your mentorship seriously," Swiftcloud sounded surprised.

"Of course! Mentoring is the most amazing thing I've ever been assigned to do, if I'll be honest."

"Honestly, I think a lot of cats were surprised when Whitestar picked you to have an apprentice."

Frostfeather agreed, giving a shrug. "I know. That's why I'm going to put my best into doing this right. I want to show the clan that choosing me to mentor was the right choice. And Pansypaw's a good cat, she deserves someone who can teach her properly. She's already so smart."
A sparkle shone in Frostfeather's pale green eyes as they shifted from Swiftcloud onto Pansypaw. Pansypaw was taking a fat young

hare towards the elders den on a large oak leaf, pulling it by the stem for easier transport. Swiftcloud had never seen a cat transfer prey that way. How clever of an idea that was.

"She really is something! I have no doubt that you'll turn Pansypaw into a warrior Grassclan can be proud of."

"From your mouth to Silverpelt's ears."

"Anyways, lets get to the medicine den already. I'm sure Shadowfang's bored out of his fur in there."
Swiftcloud nodded her head in the direction of the den as she spoke. Frostfeather smiled, giving a little bounce.
There were a few cats lingering outside when the mollies approached. Ladybugbite laid a fox-length away on her back, belly exposed and paws to her chest. She was sunning herself beside Dewstone who helped clean her wounded ear. A tail-length closer to the medicine den was Chicorynose. She was being tended to by Goldensong who fretted that the deputy's injury may scar. And then there was Snowfrost who was busy dealing with Gingerstrike, a large wad of cobwebs being wrapped around his neck. Swiftcloud made a mental note to check up on all the warriors later, worried for their conditions.
When Swiftcloud and Frostfeather finally slipped into the medicine den, both were shocked to find Shadowfang standing over one of Jaybird's kits, a paw repeatedly pressing against her chest.

"Someone get help!" The tom yowled at the sight of them, the most heart wrenching look of fear upon his face. Below him, Jaybird's kit was twitching, a disturbing cough rising from her little chest. Her kitten blue eyes were wide, glazed over by pain.

"What happened?!" Swiftcloud demanded to know.

"Jaybird's kit has kitten cough. But she was fine a few heartbeats ago. Snowfrost was just here, she checked on her, gave her some herbs. And no sooner she left to take care of other cats, the kitten started choking!" Shadowfang began to hyperventilate, giving his full attention to the silver tabby kitten. "She can't breathe, *please* get a medicine cat!" He pleaded.

Frostfeather turned fast on her heels to sprint out of the medicine den. "Snowfrost!"

"I'll-I'll go get Jaybird!" Swiftcloud decided in a panic, whipping around and rushing to the nursery as quick as her paws could carry her. She darted beneath the honeysuckle bush, shaking the branches violently as she skidded to a halt in the dug-out beneath. The queens who lay within the den all turned to look at the frantic warrior simultaneously, mirroring the same confused and dazed expressions. The young kits in the den mewled out in surprise of the new arrival. Ashwhisker sat up in his nest, awoken from his nap by the cries of his two newborn kits.

"J-Jaybird, come quick! Its your kit!" Exclaimed Swiftcloud.
Jaybird immediately rose to her paws without question, Ashwhisker doing the same. No doubt the Den Mother would come assist when it came to a kit in trouble. Swiftcloud took no time to explain what was going wrong, she simply turned and rushed back out of the nursery, right back to the medicine den. The two queens were hot on her tail, coming to a skidding halt behind her as they witnessed the scene which was unfolding.
Snowfrost was standing over the body of Jaybird's kit, her paw pressing rhythmically against her chest. Herbs had been slipped beneath the kitten's nose, perhaps to help open her lungs. Snowfrost's efforts seemed to be in vain, but still the medicine cat was not giving up yet. This was her kin, of course she would do everything she could to save her.

"My baby!" Jaybird cried, Ashwhisker holding her back by the scruff. Swiftcloud watched on to see what the fate of the half-moon old kitten would turn out to be. Her nubby tail wiggled with anxiety, claws kneading into the earth beneath her paws.
After a few nerve wracking moments, everything went still. Shadowfang was the first to make a move, melting into a sobbing black mess on the floor. Snowfrost's shoulders slumped, a sigh escaping her.
"I'm sorry..." Snowfrost's mew was soft and low. She didn't need to say any more for everyone to know what had happened.

"Nooo!" Jaybird wailed, pelting forward as soon as Ashwhisker let her go. Shadowfang lifted his head enough to look up at the

hysterical queen, ears flat against his head.

"I'm-I'm sorry," he croaked. "I don't know what happened. One moment she was fine, napping in the nest next to me, the next she was... I tried...I tried to help.. I tried to help her hang on until the medicine cats came! I..I..."
Swiftcloud found her paws moving for her, bringing her to settle by Shadowfang's side. She layed down and pressed her patched pelt against his, providing the tom the support he certainly needed now. Ashwhisker rounded the group, squeezing himself between Shadowfang and Jaybird to press his flanks against both cats. He leaned more into Jaybird, but bent around to groom his son between the ears soothingly.

"My poor kit..." Jaybird weeped, darkening the kitten's silver tabby fur as tears dripped from the queen's face.

"Jaybird," Ashwhisker whispered. "You must choose a name."

"Now..?" Jaybird hiccuped, pulling away for a moment to acknowledge the Den Mother.

"Why does she need to do that?" Swiftcloud asked before she could stop herself.

"It's tradition. All cats must be named when they become official members of a clan. Jaybird's kit has just joined Starclan, and she needs a name for them to call her by."
Swiftcloud nodded slightly in understanding turning her gaze onto Jaybird to see what she would do. The silver tabby queen was deathly still, her blue eyes trained on the inanimate form of her child. A quiet settled upon the den, making the air in the space feel uncomfortable and stagnant. Finally Jaybird shifted, lowering her muzzle to touch her nose to her tiny daughter's ear.

"Dovekit," she decided solemnly. "Her name is Dovekit."

Ashwhisker nodded, dipping his head. "Starclan, we pray you accept Dovekit into your ranks, that her name may be known among you, and spoken with a mother's love. Have her watch over us now, for Grassclan will miss her dearly," the Den Mother prayed, making

Jaybird sob again. "The clan shall sit vigil for her tonight." The dilute tortoiseshell tom turned to touch his nose to the grief stricken queen's ear. "And I shall find some flowers to make a nice nest in her grave. How does that sound?"
Jaybird nodded weakly, gaze unfocused as her muzzle now rested upon the still figure of her lost kitten. Ashwhisker turned his head to address Swiftcloud, expression serious.
"Will you fetch Whitestar and tell her of the news?"

Swiftcloud nodded, rising to her paws. It was difficult to make herself pull away from Shadowfang's side, but she knew she'd be right back to comfort him.

"Whitestar, may I come in?" Swiftcloud called, poking her head into the leader's den. Whitestar was laying in her nest, washing along Lightkit's back. When she heard the warrior calling, she paused in her task, beckoning Swiftcloud in with her tail.

"Swiftcloud!" Thornkit cheered, rushing over to greet her. He paused about a tail-length away when he saw the look on her face. "What's wrong?" This gained Whitestar's attention once more, prompting the leader to stand.

Swiftcloud shook her head at Thornkit "Would it be alright if we spoke alone for a moment?" She spoke directly to the clan leader, ignoring the excited kit for now.
Whitestar swished her tail in agreement, nudging her kittens towards the den's entrance. Thornkit and Lightkit complained a little, but were more than happy to leave when told to visit their father. When the kits were gone, Swiftcloud stepped fully into the den.

"What seems to be the trouble, Swiftcloud?"

Swiftcloud swallowed the lump of sadness in her throat. "One of Jaybird's kits has died."

Whitestar's ears pricked in surprise, though her eyes shone more knowing than shock. "Oh dear, I feared this may happen. How dreadful.... Thank you for letting me know. I shall have the clan sit vigil for her. Did Jaybird give the kit a name?"

"She said her name is Dovekit."

Whitestar hummed thoughtfully. "I should make an announcement to the clan, then. Come."

***

"Let all cats old enough to run across the meadow gather here beneath the Tall Stone for a clan meeting."

Those who resided in the medicine den were the first to come out at the leader's call. Jaybird's head hang, ears and eyes lowered. Ashwhisker and Frostfeather flanked either of her sides to comfort her. Snowfrost followed a few paces behind, carrying Dovekit's body to be presented to the clan. Between her teeth around the kit's scruff were two stems of lavender to mask the stench of death coming from the little one's pelt.
A few heartbeats later warriors, elders, and apprentices alike edged their way towards Tall Stone. Cricketsong gathered with her family just outside the nursery, becoming alert upon the sight of Jaybird through the crowd. Swiftcloud watched her excuse herself to Cowpatch, weaving her way around clanmates to settle by her best friend. Mistypaw and Rabbitstorm, whom both just arrived in camp came to sit beside their sister. Frostfeather did not dare speak the news, granting Whitestar the chance to do so instead. In no time all the clan was in attendance, minus the quarter moon old kits and a few others. Happy with the turnout, Whitestar began the meeting.

"Today has been a day of terrible loss for our clan. Earlier we were defeated in battle by our enemy, losing a small portion of the Forest Patch to Treeclan as a result. And now I'm afraid another bit of misfortune has come upon Grassclan. Jaybird has lost one of her kits to illness. It's a sad time for our clan. But we will overcome these tragedies. For now, though, let us sit vigil for our lost almost-clanmate. Jaybird's kit, Dovekit, would have no doubt been a great warrior and asset. I am sad that we shall never get to see what she may have become. But I have no doubt that she is watching over us from Starclan. She now rests with Butterflytail, Ryestep, Waspwing, and all the other cats we have lost over the seasons. Let us feel honored that we had the pleasure of having another kit in our camp at all. Let us honor the short life that Dovekit was able to live."

Cats began to turn, moving towards the center of camp. Snowfrost stood there beside Dovekit's body, swaying her tail to invite cats over. Chicorynose was one of the first to move to groom the kit.

"Shouldn't you be doing a follow up on some of the injured?" She asked Snowfrost, the slightest hint of bitterness in her tone. Swiftcloud watched Snowfrost take a step back in shock, then turn and storm off into the crowd. After the deputy finished paying her respects, each clanmate came forward in turn to do the same. Swiftcloud was one of the last to step up. She dipped her head, touching her nose to Dovekit's forehead.

"Be good in Starclan. Watch out for us, please." She whispered before running her tongue along the kitten's cheek. Swiftcloud stepped back, allowing Jaybird and her family to finally come over to sit beside their lost kin. No one else would stay out here with Dovekit for long, no doubt. But many stuck around by the edges of the clearing to share tongues for a while. Swiftcloud scanned the crowd for more familiar faces. She was surprised to see that she hadn't spotted Shadowfang at all. Had he even come to attend the meeting? Swiftcloud rose to her paws, trotting over to the medicine den. It was strangely quiet in here compared to the clatter going on just outside. But it was nice to get some peace now. Just as she had suspected though, Shadowfang did not reside with their clanmates. He'd returned to his assigned nest, curled up inside with his tail covering his little black nose. For a heartbeat, Swiftcloud wondered if he'd gone to sleep. But as she approached she was suprised to find him awake and fully alert, perking up slightly at the sight of her. Though his excitement dimmed rather quickly. He settled back down after only a heartbeat later. His eyes stare into nothingness, dull and unfocused.

"I've never seen you so sad," Swiftcloud realized, voice soft and full of sympathy. She invited herself into Shadowfang's nest, tucking her paws beneath her. Her pelt brushed lightly against his, but she'd left enough room so that she wouldn't be so invasive in his space. "You know it's not your fault that Dovekit died, right?"

Shadowfang shook his head slightly, sighing through his nose. Quiet claimed the den again for a few moments, leaving Swiftcloud to wonder if her friend would even respond. "It's not about that," he

finally mewed, voice rough, giving away that he'd recently been crying. "Seeing Dovekit sick, and then dying...it reminded me of what happened with my littermates."

"I didn't know you had littermates." Swiftcloud was surprised she'd never heard about them until now. Not even from Ashwhisker.

Shadowfang nodded. "Shadekit and Starlingkit. My brother and sister. They died of greencough when we were two moons old. I watched Starlingkit as he died. And I'd been separated from Shadekit by the time she passed. Ashwhisker and Smokesmout had caught greencough too. That Leafbare I thought I would lose my whole family... It was awful."

"I can only imagine." Swiftcloud pressed herself into him a little more to provide comfort.

"If anything happened to Ashwhisker, or his kits...." Shadowfang continued, taking a momentary pause. Something seemed to dawn on him. "Or *you*... Starclan, I don't know what I would do. I'm terrified of what this Leafbare will bring. It was difficult dealing with all of that illness as a kit. And to possibly deal with it now, while in the middle of a war..." Shadowfang's voice was soft but sped with anxiety, words coming out faster and faster with each new sentence.

"Hey, hey, shhh. It's going to be ok, Shadowfang," Swiftcloud hushed the tom gently, licking his cheek.

"Swiftcloud...." Shadowfang lifted his head to look at her, his green eyes rimmed with tears. A passion burned in his gaze like emerald flames, baring deep into Swiftcloud's soft blue eyes. Swiftcloud could feel her heart pick up pace as she wondered what was going on. Shadowfang moved his muzzle, touching it to the rim of her ear. His breath felt warm upon it as he drew in a breath. When he finally spoke, his voice came out hushed; all the emotion which had shown in his eyes reflected in his tone "I love you."

Swiftcloud's ears pricked, the fur along her spine rising with astonishment. Her pelt felt like it had turned to blazing hot fire as Shadowfang's words rang in her ears. Her heart beat so loudly in

her chest she feared the tom beside her may even be able to hear. Her head whirled. She was over the moon. In this moment Swiftcloud had to be the happiest and most flustered cat in all of the Land's Star.

"Sh..Shadowfang," she stammered, unsure if her voice would fail her. "Th-this is so sudden. I..I had no idea you felt so s-strongly about me..."

"Sometimes I think I should have said something sooner," he admitted, pulling back a bit to look at her again. "Like when we'd gotten away from that fox. We could have easily died that day. And Starclan knows how scared I was that we might have."

"You saved my life," Swiftcloud reminded him softly. Shadowfang smiled a little.

"I did... And I'd do it again. Giving my life for you would be as honorable to me as doing so for the clan. You're worth that much to me."

Swiftcloud resisted the urge to duck her head bashfully. "Do you really mean that..?"

"Of course I do..! I knew the day we met that you were special. That whatever relationship we might form would be great. But I never realized how hard I'd fall for you. I really do love you, Swiftcloud. And I'd be honored if you'd have me as your mate."

"Oh, Shadowfang..." Swiftcloud sighed dreamily. Her tail wiggled nervously as she worked up the nerve to utter the words she was dying to say out loud. "I....I love you too."

"You do?" Shadowfang sounded hesitant but perked up nonetheless.

"Yes. I'm sorry it's taken me so long to realize..."

His muzzle came to nuzzle into her cheek, drawing in her scents and she his. "That's alright. I'd rather you take your time than rush and force yourself to have feelings for me."

"Oh I've always had feelings for you. I just didn't know what they

truly were until now. Although... I want to be with you, Shadowfang, but...I'm not even sure if I'm ready to settle down."

"We don't have to have kits or anything, if you don't want them," he assured.

"It's not that. I'm just...still working out how I feel about-" Swiftcloud was cut off.

"I know I'm not the only cat that you're interested in. But I'm ok with that. If you decide you want to have more than one mate, then I'm more than happy to share."

"And if I want kits someday too..?" Swiftcloud asked sheepishly.

Shadowfang purred, his smile growing. "Then we'll have the best kits in all of Grassclan."

Swiftcloud returned his purr, licking him along his muzzle. "You're far too kind, do you know that?"

"Really? I thought I was nothing more than an annoying clump of fur."

"Oh, you are. *And* a mouse-brain. But you're mine," she giggled.

Shadowfang's purr rumbled louder in her ears at the remark. "I like the sound of that."
Silence settled upon the den once again, comfortable and warm. Only the sounds of purring disturbed the overall peace. It was a welcomed change from earlier's melancholy. Swiftcloud and Shadowfang took time to enjoy one another, sharing tongues and taking in each other's prescene.

"...What made you finally decide to confess to me?" Swiftcloud decided to find out.

"The thought of losing you. The pressure, fear.... I don't want to have any regrets.... The next few moons to come are going to be hard, and I wanted you to know how I feel in case the worst should happen. And I thought that having you by my side during it all will make the hardships easier to bare; rather than standing around and

pining longer."
Swiftcloud nodded, satisfied by the tom's answer. Quiet came upon them once more. After a while the pair decided to settle down and try to sleep. Shadowfang moved over, inviting Swiftcloud further into his nest. He rolled onto his side, draping a front leg and his tail around his best friend, his mate. Swiftcloud curled into him, tucking her nose under the black tom's chin. As they lay there awaiting sleep to take hold, her mind started to wander. Swiftcloud felt so at ease. She had a mate now. Shadowfang, her best friend, was hers to call her own. But a worm of anxiety gnawed at her belly like a hungry grub. Was it wrong of her to be happy right now? Today had been terrible, full of loss. But at least she could say there was one thing to gain, right? This couldn't be so wrong. To indulge in a moment of peace, of happiness. But Swiftcloud knew good things did not last long, especially during such hard times. But she would not allow herself to think of that now. Worrying could wait for another day. A small grunt escaped her, prompting the patch she-cat to bury her face deeper into Shadowfang's fur.

"Goodnight," she murmured, sleep finally settling upon her. Yes, worrying could wait for another time.

Chapter 30

Two days of relative peace past before disaster struck again. A bright sunny day brought with it another Treeclan battle, resulting in another harsh defeat for Grassclan. Swiftcloud was among the first to burst into camp, body riddled with various wounds. A cat had seen her hardly healed shoulder and went to town on it, leaving the gash much deeper than before. Any hopes of it healing properly were long gone. Shadowfang also returned to camp with a wound that would potentially scar. A slash on his flank turned sleek black fur rusty brown. The wound was deep, still gushing and angry. Swiftcloud worried for him. Even more injuries littered the tom than on her. Shadowfang's leg had been wounded too, deeply bitten in the meat of his thigh. The young warrior would probably be nest-ridden for a half moon or more. *What will I do without my partner?* Swiftcloud worried, letting Shadowfang lean on her. She led him slowly over to the medicine cat's den, where he could rest and soon be tended to. Upon emerging, Swiftcloud could see more of the damage from today's battle. Rabbitstorm seemed to be sporting a similar wound to hers, on the opposite shoulder. Jaybird fussed over him, trying to clean the cuts and get the bloodstains out of his mostly white fur. A ways off, Nectarpaw was licking a bloody white paw, assisted by her sister Lilacpaw who cleaned a slash on her back. Cowpatch was behind her, licking blood from a bite on her tail. Rosebloom was two tail-lengths away, twisted around, nosing at some fresh cobweb laid down by Mistypaw on her flank. And by Tall Stone, Tigerfang receive furious licks on the muzzle by Whitestar, who was no doubt mewing complaints of foolishness to her mate.

Ambereye was one of the last cats to burst through the bramble tunnel, pelt darkened with thick crimson blood. She stood by the entrance panting heavily, as if she had just ran home all the way from Split Rock. Her legs shook violently as she stepped forward, so much so that it caused her to collapse. She let out a deep wheeze then began to spasm on the floor. Distressed yowls rose up from Swiftcloud's clanmates as cats started to surround the seizing warrior. Goldensong and Mistypaw pushed through the crowd,

corraling the onlookers towards the edges of camp to give Ambereye room to breathe.
Ambereye withered against the earth for a few moments more before tensing up, her body locking into an odd position. The amber warrior's front end stay outstretched, paws reaching across the grass with claws extended uncomfortably. Her back end lay curled up, tail wrapped around back paws which pressed against her belly, toes curled together tightly. Ambereye's head lay at a crooked angle, one ear to the floor and jaws locked wide open. A high pitched whine of agony escaped the her, tears streaming down her face. The only part of herself she was able to move was her eyes, which darted around wildly.

"Goldensong! Snowfrost! Mistypaw!" Jaybird cried out as she ran to her mate's side. The queen licked Ambereye furiously, crying into her fur as she waited for help to arrive. Goldensong came running over, Mistypaw in toe with a supply of herbs. She halted by the frozen warrior's side, gasping out as she bared witness to what had become of the amber warrior now.

"Starclan!" She shrieked.
As she did so, Ambereye's eyes rolled to the back of her head. Her chest immediately stopped moving, followed by a sickening gurgling sound. Cats backed away in horror, and Jaybird pulled herself that much closer to her mate. Swiftcloud found herself frozen in terror. She wanted to flee, to hide her face in some cat's pelt or to hide away in a den, but her paws would not allow her to move.
It was only a few more moments before the noises emitted from Ambereye finally stopped. Everything lay eerily still and it seemed as if Goldensong had to force herself to approach and examine the warrior. She lifted a shaky paw, resting it upon the cat's chest.

"She's gone... She hunts with Starclan now." She announced solemnly. Jaybird began to wail. Mistypaw brought herself to her mother's side instantly, pressing her fluffy body against her comfortingly. A few silver tears dripped down her pale face, and Swiftcloud felt herself move to flank the apprentice's other side. Mistypaw turned her head to press it into Swiftcloud's shoulder, and Swiftcloud gave her a few calming licks between the ears in return.

She could feel how tense the other molly was, how grief had already latched onto her like a burr to a thick pelt.
More warriors began to bring themselves closer to Ambereye, Whitestar pushing herself to the front. She looked distraught, ears lowered and tail drooping.

"Ambereye..." She whispered, settling by the molly's head. "I'm so sorry...." The Grassclan leader dipped her head, sobbing softly to herself. Her mouth moved but the words she spoke were unable to be heard. Perhaps Whitestar was saying her final goodbyes, apologizing more, or praying. Whatever she had said led her to rest her muzzle on top of Ambereye's. Swiftcloud waited for the leader to move, but it did not appear as if she would anytime soon. *She must have been closer to Ambereye than I'd realized.* The sight of Grassclan's leader sobbing and miserable was hard to take in. It was hard seeing any cat upset, but Whitestar? This was becoming too much for Swiftcloud to bare. Still, she remained by the fallen warrior's side for the time being to pay her respects.
Swiftcloud took a pace away from Mistypaw to share tongues with Ambereye one last time. As Swiftcloud prayed, looking at the deceased she-cat, she noticed something peculiar. The way Ambereye laid was the position she had died in. But the way she looked seemed eerily familiar.
Swiftcloud thought back to her early days in the clan, to the time of her first assessment. She remembered how she found poor Waspwing. Now, Swiftcloud realized, he was laying in almost the exact same way as Ambereye was.
Another dead clan member's memory crawled into Swiftcloud's mind. Butterflytail-the Guard warrior, the sire to Whitestar's litter-had come to camp after a battle and collapsed in a way very similar to Ambereye. When he finally lay still, his body matched Waspwing's and Ambereye's. *How is that possible?*
Swiftcloud moved, placing herself close to Whitestar so she could examine Ambereye's muzzle. Narrowing her eyes, Swiftcloud noticed a few bright red drops of a liquid clinging to the warrior's lips, one or two dripping down the bottom of her chin. *Blood?* No. It couldn't possibly be blood. Compared to the thick dark red which caked around Ambereye's wounds, the liquid on her mouth was much different. That was another thing which reminded Swiftcloud of Waspwing. He had the same thing too. *Hadn't Goldensong said it*

was berry juice? Berry juice.... Swiftcloud suddenly remembered the bush she'd found during the investigation of Waspwing's death. Could this mean Ambereye had been poisoned, the same way he had? Perhaps Butterflytail as well?
Swiftcloud began to think about the evidence she and Dewstone had collected for Waspwing, and compared it to what had become of Ambereye. All three cats had some connection to Treeclan; Waspwing found on the border, and both Butterflytail and Ambereye returning home from a border skirmish. Could Treeclan be responsible for the warriors' deaths? It seemed to be the most logical answer, but there was still one fact out of place. If Ambereye and Butterflytail truly were poisoned, like Swiftcloud guessed, then how did either of them make it back to Grassclan's camp? Surely the poison would have taken hold long before they'd arrived. The Forest Patch was a long distance from here. Could that mean someone on Grassclan's territory had killed them?
Swiftcloud's head began to reel. All this connecting information was too much for her to bare right now. *I will definitely discuss this with Dewstone later*, she decided. For now, Swiftcloud needed to be healed, and to have a good rest. She stood up onto her paws, giving herself a good but painful stretch. After nuzzling Mistypaw one last time, Swiftcloud turned, taking herself to the medicine den to be with Shadowfang.

"Let all cats old enough to travel through the meadow gather here beneath the Tall Stone for a clan meeting."
The call woke Swiftcloud from her slumber the next morning, summoning her out from the warrior's den. She followed her denmates into the clearing, seating herself in the center of the crowd. Shadowfang shuffled his way through their clanmates to sit and press himself into her side. Swiftcloud leaned her head against his as they turned their muzzles towards Tallstone.

"A discussion must be held over what we are planning to do about Treeclan," Whitestar began. "Normally, this would be a meeting held only between myself and the clan's senior warriors. However, since this matter has become more personal for all of us, I believe its justified to open battle discussions up to the whole of Grassclan."

"We need strategies on how we are to take on Treeclan. If any cat

has an idea, speak up now," meowed Chicorynose, green eyes scanning the crowd. A few murmurs could be caught coming from the crowd, but otherwise no one spoke up. Swiftcloud glanced around her, wondering if any cat had an idea of what to do. *I might*, she realized, thinking things over in her mind. She'd come up with a plan, but it might be a tricky one. Would Whitestar approve? Swiftcloud kept her mouth shut a while longer, listening, waiting to see if anyone else had something to say. But no cat said a word.

"What..what if we pushed back the border?" Swiftcloud finally managed to pipe. All eyes turned to rest upon her immediately. Swiftcloud felt small under the clan's gaze.

"Push back the border?" Chicorynose echoed, looking for further explanation. Swiftcloud gulped, giving a nod. She wouldn't stand here and allow herself to be afraid to speak up, yet alone show that to the whole clan. An unusual sense of calm settled upon her, the likes of which she hadn't felt take over since the first time she'd stepped foot in camp. Swiftcloud reinflated herself, squaring her shoulders as she spoke up again.

"Treeclan continues to cross the border, trying to 'reclaim' the forest. But what if we denied them the ability to do so? What if we created a more distinct border in the Forest Patch? Like... the... Thunder Path?"
Whispers of approval and doubt filtered through her clanmates, but Swiftcloud prevented herself from being discouraged. She looked at Tall Stone, studying Grassclan's leader, seeking her opinon. For a heartbeat Whitestar was still, as if she were thinking over the idea. In another, Swiftcloud caught an odd glimpse of thrill and pride flash in the Grassclan leader's eyes.

"Perhaps that is exactly what we need, to decrease the chances of feuds, and to stop this war once and for all. Yes....yes. Grassclan, our mission is clear now: end the war, and push back the border."
That was fast! Swiftcloud thought, confusion and yet pride swelling in her chest. Initially, she had thought Whitestar would want to give this idea more thought and discussion before deciding if this was the plan they'd go for. But perhaps the idea really was that brilliant. Or maybe for some reason Whitestar trusted her that much.

"But before we set this plan into motion, there is one more matter that must be addressed," Whitestar meowed. "The reassignment of Ambereye's apprentice, Tulippaw. In times like this, we cannot afford to wait to continue a cat's training. We need as many paws in this fight as we can get." Murmurs rippled through the crowd, as each cat looked to one another, wondering who Whitestar would choose to be mentor.
"Swiftcloud. You have proven to be a great warrior; you are ready for your first apprentice. I trust that you will be good to Tulippaw, and pass down all that Chicorynose has taught you to her in turn." Swiftcloud jumped to her paws, eyes wide with shock. *She* had been chosen? Shadowfang looked beside himself with glee and smiled at her encouragingly, whispering the first of many congratulations. He nudged her, urging Swiftcloud forward to meet her new apprentice by Tall Stone's base. Tulippaw had been guided to the front of the crowd by Cowpatch. She stood waiting for her new mentor, flashing her an excited grin. Yet her eyes shone sadness; clearly this reassignment had not gone as she had once hoped. Swiftcloud felt the same. She was thrilled, yet at the same time melancholy. This was a bittersweet moment for both of them. Perhaps it would help them bond, or maybe it would serve as a wedge between them. Regardless, Swiftcloud silently swore that she would do the best she could to teach Tulippaw, and turn her into the greatest warrior Grassclan could ever ask for. Without a moment's hesitation, Swiftcloud stepped forward to touch noses with Tulippaw, her hearing dulled to the sounds of their clanmates cheering their names. *I'm hardly a warrior myself, but I am going to take good care of Tulippaw for you, Ambereye. She's in safe paws. And one day soon, I'll uncover the truth about your death.*

Chapter 31

The next day brought with it murkiness and rain. Plans had been posponed until the downpour slowed. Meanwhile it gave Whitestar time to strategize in her den with the clan's senior warriors.
"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather beneath Tall Stone!" That was Chicorynose caterwauling outside. Her voice sounded distant behind the drumming of rain against the rocky den roof. The call she meowed was an unusual one, but none unlike Swiftcloud had heard before. *She's probably trying to organize patrols*, she figured, rising from her nest. Swiftcloud looked back at her wide eyed denmates, none of whom seemed willing to get up.

"Grassclan warriors! Apprentices! Come out here!" Chicorynose demanded impatiently.

"But it's raining!" Gingerstrike complained, tucking himself deeper into his bracken and wool lined nest. It was unlike him to go against orders. Though, Swiftcloud thought that perhaps the mixture of the rain and the grief of losing Ambereye had made his attitude more sour. It was a shame to see the noble warrior so broken down.

"If she's so eager to speak to us she'll just have to haul her soaking wet hide in here," Bumblethroat chimed. The pale brown tabby tom was hardly different from his brother, the late warrior Butterflytail. Like him, Bumblethroat was a bit spoiled and adamant in his choices, but Swiftcloud always thought him to be more sensible. Though she supposed even the most rational of Grassclan cats would be hesitant to go on patrol during a rainfall.

"She better not get any water on us," Ladybugbite grumbled, grooming her calico spotted tail. "I don't know about all of you, but I'd like to keep the rain outside and away from my pelt, where it belongs."

Other cats mumbled in amused agreement. Swiftcloud scoffed. Though she had to admit she wasn't fond of the rain either, at least

she wasn't as adamant about going out in it as the rest of her denmates were. *Brave warriors indeed. Can't even handle a little rain.* Swiftcloud lifted her chin, padding to the den's entrance. She gave one last glance over her shoulder towards the stubborn warriors before heading out.

"Tulippaw!" She called as she trotted past the apprentice's den. At once the brown and white she-cat emerged, bounding to her mentor's side. A squeal of surprise escaped her as the rain assaulted her thin pelt, probably sending a shock of cold through her. The apprentice gave a leap, pressing her soaked pelt against Swiftcloud's for warmth.

"I'm glad to see at least *some cats* are willing to come when their deputy calls!" Chicorynose remarked loud enough for all den bound cats to hear. "Since you two are brave enough to come out first, you'll be on hunting patrol with me."
Relief claimed Swiftcloud at the news, and Tulippaw gave a little bounce.

"Will you teach me how to catch birds, Swiftcloud?" Tulipaw requested. "Nobody catches them the way you can."

"Oh wow, I'd be glad to teach you!" Swiftcloud was surprised by the apprentice's enthusiasm, especially in this kind of weather.
Tulippaw had always been an excitable student, Swiftcloud had known, but she never saw this strong of an interest when Ambereye was teaching her.
Chicorynose tipped her head, prompting the two she-cats to have a seat. In a heartbeat she turned, slipping into the warrior's den. Her voice carried even halfway across camp, though her words were lost in the patter of raindrops. Swiftcloud felt cold seeping into her fur with every moment and hoped Chicorynose would hurry along. *My nubby tail might freeze off by the time we leave camp*, she worried. A chorus of groans followed Chicorynose out of the warrior's den, followed by the displeased group of warriors who begrudgingly followed the deputy into the clearing.

"Come on, you know I wouldn't be making you patrol in the rain if I didn't have to. But we have to keep a watch on the Treeclan border. The fresh-kill pile is stocked enough that my patrol and I can fill the

rest of the gaps in. You all only have to mark boundaries. So stop complaining."
Bumblethroat grumbled something under his breath, making Ladybugbite snicker. Chicorynose turned on the tom and hissed at him before turning around. She stalked back to Swiftcloud and Tulippaw, waving her tail in a command for them to follow. The pair rose to their paws, padding behind the deputy and out of camp.

"Are we going back to the Forest Patch?" Tulippaw wondered aloud.

"Oh no, definitely not. Especially not after the stunt you pulled last time. No, we're going to Rabbit Gorge. I don't recall Ambereye telling me you ever successfully hunted a rabbit before. Today is a good day to practice."

Tulippaw groaned. "But Swiftcloud said she'd teach me how to hunt birds."

"There'll probably be some in the trees nearby the warren. You can catch birds there."

It had been a while since Swiftcloud had visited Rabbit Gorge. She'd originally favored the Forest Patch for it's abundance of cover. The gorge did not provide many places for a cat to hide, especially for her. Chicorynose and Tulippaw would have an easier time hunting there in the dull brown grasses where their pelts seamlessly blended. But Swiftcloud's mostly white fur would make her more easily spotted. Luckily, hunting rabbits was a team effort. In Rabbit Gorge, Swiftcloud was better at flushing out prey, leading it into the awaiting claws of her partner. It wasn't the way she wanted to teach Tulippaw to hunt, but she'd have to learn how to do it this way sometime.

The rain turned rich soil muddy, raindrops causing splatter and creating a fog of mud-spray. Hunting here today would be messy. But the rabbits would be more easily disoriented, disliking heavy rain almost as much as Grassclan warriors did. And their eyesight was poor already; the fog would further serve to provide the cats better cover.

"The three of us will work together today, " Chicorynose meowed.

"In this weather, it would probably be for the best. Swiftcloud, I'll take Tulippaw over this way." The deputy pointed with her tail. "You track down a rabbit and chase it in our direction."
Swiftcloud gave a nod of approval, turning tail and stalking off. She glided along a worn down path into the gorge, opening her mouth to taste the air. The warm smell of rabbit rushed over her scent glands, tempting the warrior closer. A bear-length in front of her, three rabbits sat huddled beneath a shelf of earth. The area they sat under looked to have been worn down by moons of erosion, most likely due to past flooding. But today it served as the perfect shelter from the rain. Along the same stretch of shelter, another fox-length down, Swiftcloud could see more rabbits huddled together. Why were so many outside in this weather? Was their warren flooded out? Worry began to prickle in the white and black patched molly's pelt. She suddenly felt unsafe here, alone in the gorge. But she wouldn't have to stay long, she reminded her. Through her anxiety Swiftcloud pressed forward, dropping into a crouch and stalking through the grass. She'd need to be as close as possible to chase the rabbits in the right direction. Quiet as a mouse, the patched warrior crept up on her unsuspecting prey. When she was in striking distance, she leaned back on her haunches. She gave a little wiggle, narrowing her eyes in foucus, before bolting out of cover. The rabbits shot out from their shelter like lightning, pelting away as fast as their swift legs could carry them. Swiftcloud was able to keep up easily, swiping at one and tripping it up enough to injure it. Two rabbits ran right into the patrol's trap, getting pounced on and killed off by Chicorynose and an eager Tulippaw. Swiftcloud made quick work of the third rabbit who let out a pained squeal as its life came to an end. Pride swelled in Swiftcloud chest as she picked up her catch, spying the rabbit Tulippaw had snagged. Swiftcloud dragged her prey over to the patrol, placing it before the paws of the deputy.

"Good catch!" She praised, smiling. "How about you two go and find yourself a bird? I'll see if I can nab another rabbit in the meantime."
Tulippaw lit up at the suggestion. Swiftcloud twitched her whiskers approvingly. She flicked an ear, prompting her apprentice to follow her elsewhere.
Swiftcloud's blue eyes scanned the few spare trees along the edges of the gorge, ears trained to the sound of chirping. There was prey

nearby, though it was a couple bear-lengths off. Swiftcloud decided to make this a teachable moment, using this time to explain how she developed her bird hunting technique.

"Back when I was a kittypet," she began, "my Twoleg would swing around a vine with feathers on the end and make me jump to catch it. It was a lot of fun, and I used those skills to develop a technique for catching birds taking flight."

"Really..? Wait, you were a kittypet?" Tulippaw sounded shocked.

Swiftcloud nodded. "I was. I joined the clan when you were very young. I'm suprised no one told you. Or that you didn't overhear about it from someone."

"I think I did. But I guess I never really believed it. You don't act the way kittypets are described at all."

"That's because I never really belonged as a Twoleg's toy," Swiftcloud confessed. "I always knew there was something more out there for me. Joining Grassclan had been like coming home for first time. And ever since, I've done my very best to live the ways of a clanborn cat and to follow the Warrior Code."

"I think I wanna be just like you when I'm a warrior," Tulippaw decided. Swiftcloud felt honored. She'd never realized a cat would even want to look up to her. Then again, she'd never believed she would have an apprentice either.

"As long as you listen to your lessons and learn well, I think you'll turn out exactly as you want. Now, let me show you how to catch a flying bird."
Tulippaw smiled brightly at her mentor, dropping into a crouch beside her.
"At first you want to keep low to the ground. Step lightly, but swiftly, and keep from sight. A bird will see you before it will smell you, but on the ground it'll feel you first. Use a mouse hunting crouch to start, then when you're close enough change your position to have your haunches raised." Swiftcloud demonstrated, Tulippaw following her every pawstep. Swiftcloud's voice dropped to a soft whisper as she continued. "That way you're ready to leap when the

bird takes off. Then, spring out using the power of your back legs, leap up, and swipe at the bird's wings."
Tulippaw gave a nod, continuing on her way as a wood pigeon dropped down from the trees, directly in her path. The apprentice gave a glance back at her mentor before putting her focus forward. Haunches raised, Tulippaw hesitated a moment before leaping. The bird gave a startled coo, flapping it's wings and taking off. But before it could get far Tulippaw leaped up, slapping the creature back to the ground. She pressed a paw to it, lunging forward to snap it's neck. The wood pigeon lay limp beneath her grip, and Swiftcloud purred approvingly.

"That was awesome Tulippaw, great job! Let's go show Chicorynose now and head home."

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"Cats of Grassclan." Swiftcloud could hear Whitestar's meow as she crawled through the bramble tunnel, emerging into the clearing. A meeting had been called; luckily the patrol had made it home just in time to listen in. Swiftcloud hurried along with her rabbit still dangling in her maw, depositing the prey on the fresh-kill pile. Chicorynose and Tulippaw were right beside her, putting down their catches to sit and listen to what Whitestar had to say.
"Tomorrow, we will set forth on our mission to push back the Treeclan border. After careful discussion with our senior warriors, a sneak attack seems the best approach. Only Fighters and Spies will be required for this task. Treeclan think they can waltz onto our land and claim it for themselves. And *that* is exactly what we are going to do to them. Spies will watch out for Treeclan patrols, while Fighters will advance ahead deeper into the Forest Patch. We will go as far as we possibly can, but not further than the Thunder Path. I don't expect us to make it that far tomorrow, but if we keep it up and if we win, we should be able to claim our new borders within a moon. It will be dangerous. Fighting is guaranteed to ensue. But Starclan willing, this war will be over soon."
At once, Grassclan erupted into cheers, yowling their approvals of the new plan ahead. Swiftcloud, however, remained silent. She knew that pushing the border had been her idea, but she couldn't help feeling anxious for it. *It's for the good of the clan*, she told

herself. *But so many will get hurt in the process. But…it* has *to be done.* Come what may, this was the only solution to their troubles. Treeclan would never give up more land willingly. Grassclan would have to take it by force. *For the good of both the clans.*

Chapter 32

Dawn rolled around with a quickness. Sleep was quickly disturbed by a yowl.

"Fighters, Spies, wake up," called Chicorynose, her fawn figure nothing more than a dark silhouette in the den's entryway. It was time to go. Swiftcloud rose quickly from her nest giving herself a good shake to clear herself of bracken bits and nerves. Her shoulder ached terribly, but she did not say a word about it. It would be worse later no doubt, no use complaining now. Swiftcloud followed the line of warriors as they slipped out of the den, gathering just a tail-length from the entrance. Swiftcloud's gaze drifted through the crowd. At the very edge, she spotted the clan's apprentices, even the young ones. They were coming along? Swiftcloud felt more worried now than before. *I hope they're ready for a fight.*

"Spies, you will be first to cross the border. Stay downwind so no cat may scent you. Fighters, mark the new borders while the spies keep lookout. Apprentices, you'll be following behind the Fighters. Pansypaw, since you're the youngest, you'll be the one to run to camp in the case that we need reinforcements. Does everyone understand?" Chicorynose checked, head raised and body stiff. Her expression was serious, her muscles tightened beneath her fawn pelt. The deputy had an air about her which commanded respect, demanded cats listen as she spoke. No wonder why she'd been chosen as Whitestar's successor. She'd make a great leader some day.
Could Swiftcloud ever hope to be like her mentor? She knew she had her clan's respect now, especially after coming up with the idea that led to today's battle plans. But could she ever be on Chicorynose's level? Swiftcloud began to wonder if one day she could become deputy. Even though it made her nervous, she liked the idea of being able to help the clan, to plan patrols and to solve problems. To lead beside the leader and to keep Grassclan strong. Would Whitestar or Chicorystar even want to choose her as their deputy? A sick feeling suddenly came into Swiftcloud's stomach.

The only way to get Chicorystar was for Whitestar to die. And the only way for Swiftcloud to become Whitestar's deputy was for Chicorynose to die. Swiftcloud didn't like the idea of either thing happening. She cared about Whitestar, and she loved Chicorynose like kin. Maybe it was for the best that she'd never become deputy. As long as both high ranked she-cats lived.

"Swiftcloud." A voice murmured into her ear, snapping the warrior suddenly from her thoughts. Swiftcloud blinked, looking beside her. It was Shadowfang, studying her with a concerned expression. "Are you alright?"

"Y-yeah. I'm fine," she stammered, "just a little nervous, I guess."

Shadowfang rested his tail over her good shoulder reassuringly. "It's gonna be fine. Just keep your eyes open and ears pricked. If trouble emerges you come find me, ok? Don't fight alone."
Swiftcloud gave a nod, moving to press her side into his. Shadowfang's warmth provided her comfort, calming her down enough that she could move forward without trembling. Swiftcloud kept to her mate's side the entire march to the Forest Patch, a sense of loneliness filling her when she had to pull away and go on ahead to keep lookout. They'd always get into trouble like this together, it felt wrong to do so without him. *But I'll be fighting by his side soon*, she reminded herself. Insecurity seemed to be the mood for the day. Swiftcloud saw it reflected back at her on the expressions of her fellow Spies.

"What should we do now?" Bumblethroat asked Swiftcloud, voice barely above a whisper. Ladybugbite and Cowpatch looked to her as well. Had she been deemed leader of this team? *Well, this was my idea*, she reminded herself once more.

"We should...split up. Cover more ground. But, stay within earshot. When we get five bear-lengths into the Forest Patch, I'll send a signal. I'll make a chirp sound, and go back to tell the fighters the coast is clear. The rest of you stay put until you hear me chirp again."

"Could I do it?" Cowpatch requested. "Fetch the others, I mean. I'm the fastest cat out of all of us. And I'm a Collector too, after all. This

is sort of part of my job description."

Swiftcloud gave a little noncommittal grunt. "That's fine. Does anyone else have something to add?" Bumblethroat and Ladybugbite shook their heads. "Good. Now, lets get moving."
At once, the Spy warriors separated, disappearing into the forest's dense undergrowth. Swiftcloud dropped down into a crouch, creeping across the forest floor as quiet as an owl. She kept herself balanced, careful not to allow her belly to drag against the leaf litter beneath her. Being so light in color, the white and black patched molly kept to thicker cover, hiding beneath bushes and ferns. She'd pause momentarily beneath each to look upwards, searching the canopy for any signs of Treeclan warriors lurking about. Every now and then something flashed into her vision, but when she parted her jaws, Swiftcloud was relieved to scent what was usually a squirrel or a bird. But an uneasiness couldn't be prevented from forming deep inside of her. She didn't like being in such a crowded space, where a cat could hide and leap out at her at any given moment. Normally, Swiftcloud liked the cover of the Forest Patch, if only for hunting. However, now that she could potentially become prey, her feelings drastically changed. Already Swiftcloud longed to be back in the meadow with it's wide open space and sweet strong breezes. There she felt so strong, so confident. But here she felt small and vulnerable.
Swiftcloud felt like a kittypet again, venturing into the unknown; danger awaiting around the corner, excitement and anxiety flowing through her from claw to tail-tip. But today's venture brought greater risk than the one seasons ago. Today's advances would result in the injury of many cats, not just of one overly curious housecat. Swiftcloud stifled an anxious gulp, forcing herself to calm down lest her fearscent travel. Soon, she realized, it was time to stop. A quick sniff behind her revealed the spies had successfully managed to sneak into Treeclan territory five bear-lengths. *Maybe this won't be so bad after all*, Swiftcloud smiled. After giving a quick glance around, the white and black patched warrior stood up straight, lifting her head so her voice would carry clearly. Straining her vocal cords to constrict, Swiftcloud let out a bird like chatter, alerting the other spies of their position. After a silent heartbeat, Swiftcloud could just barely spot movement in the undergrowth to her right. The shaking of leaves revealed Cowpatch's path back to

the border. Now, it was all a matter of waiting.
Around her, slowly, warriors began to appear. They all came along crouched to the forest floor, determined to complete their mission. When everyone was the same distance into the forest, Chicorynose called everyone together quietly. They spoke in the Silent Language for fear of being heard should they speak a word.

"Great job everyone. Now, let's see how much farther we can go."

"Is that safe?" Shadowfang expressed concern. "Wouldn't it be better if we marked the new boundary here, and waited another time to invade further?"

"We have already come this far. We could probably make it a couple more bear-lengths if we try."
Shadowfang lowered his ears a little, glancing towards his mate. Swiftcloud met his gaze, seeing the pain in the black tom's eyes. *His injuries from yesterday must be hurting him a lot if he's trying to avoid a fight*, she realized. Shadowfang hadn't been cleared for battle, but he had insisted upon coming today. Grassclan needed all of its Fighting warriors after all, and even if he hadn't wanted to come, Swiftcloud doubted Whitestar would let him sit out on such an important mission. But it was clear that Shadowfang shouldn't even be away from his nest. *How many other warriors are hiding their pain?* Swiftcloud wondered.
"Swiftcloud. Lead the spies another five bear-lengths ahead." Chicorynose ordered. Swiftcloud nodded, motioning for her team to follow. The four warriors disappeared back into the undergrowth, away from the hidden Fighting warriors.
Swiftcloud was alone again, and she felt every bit of that isolation. *But I have to keep moving*, she told herself. The undergrowth thinned out slightly another two bear-lengths ahead, leaving less places for the mostly white warrior to hide. Swiftcloud prayed to Starclan that she wouldn't be spotted. But when she took another few paces, it seemed like Starclan had ignored her.
In the nearby ferns, Swiftcloud spotted the movement of an enemy warrior. Though he hadn't seemed to have sensed her yet. Swiftcloud parted her jaws to taste the air. The unmistakable scent of mouse rushed over her scent glands. *He must be hunting.* Swiftcloud bristled, seeing a tiny gray creature skitter and stop a

fox-length in front of her. In a few heartbeats the warrior was on it. As he crouched, focusing on the mouse, the cat's ears swiveled forward. Swiftcloud felt her heart climb into her throat. The ginger and white cat was staring right in her direction. A growl escaped the tom, sending the mouse running. But the Treeclan warrior did not pursue. In that moment Swiftcloud knew she'd been spotted. Like a bolt of lightning, the enemy warrior shot from his place, yowling loudly and leaping onto her. Swiftcloud tried to wiggle from the cat's grasp, feeling her shoulder being bitten and her flanks being scratched. She let out a shriek of pain, but hoped none of her clanmates would come to her aid. *We need to complete the mission. I..I can handle myself!* With effort, Swiftcloud managed to throw the cat off of her. She stood on shaky legs, fluffing out her fur to make herself appear larger. The other cat mirrored her stance, and actually did manage to come across bigger. Even though this served to unnerve her, the white and black patched molly did not back down.

A few more tense moments went by, each cat waiting for the other to strike first. Swiftcloud wasn't eager to, wanting to buy her clanmates more time to advance into the Forest Patch. She guessed the other cat had a similar idea, probably waiting for backup to arrive. Some rustling in the trees above alerted Swiftcloud that the two of them now had company. Within a couple of moments, three Treeclan cats fell down from the trees. They landed perfectly on their paws, surrounding Swiftcloud on all sides. Swiftcloud whipped around in each direction, trying to identify each cat. There were four, counting the cat who'd attacked her. Shadeleaf, Bluefang, Magpietail, and Foxstrike. As she observed them, Swiftcloud realized these were not the usual cats who'd come to fight at border skirmishes. *They're Hunting warriors. This must be a hunting patrol.*

"Swiftcloud, what are you doing on Treeclan territory?" Magpietail hissed, her black tail wagging with hostility. On the outside, the she-cat appeared menacing. But looking into her eyes, Swiftcloud saw a twinge of regret. The two mollies were friends, Magpietail most likely did not want to fight. In fact, Swiftcloud doubted that she was a Fighter at all. Of course she knew how, as all warriors do, but it was likely not the Treeclan cat's career to regularly fight for her clan.

"I-uh..hadn't realized I'd wandered so far?" Swiftcloud quickly lied.

"You know where the scent markers are!" Spat Shadeleaf.

"I was too distracted with hunting," Swiftcloud defended, more confident in her words this time. "I mean no harm or disrespect. And I haven't caught anything so..I haven't truly done anything wrong. Your anger is unwarranted."

"We have every right to be angry, trespasser," Bluefang growled. "How can we know for sure that's what you were doing? I bet you're here as a Spy, not a Hunter!"

"Either way, we should tear up her hide to teach her a lesson on crossing the border. In a war no less!" Foxstrike chimed in, unsheathing his claws. Instinctively, Swiftcloud drew hers, crouching, ready to fight. As the ginger tom was about to strike her again, a blur of white and brown flashed from the undergrowth. It was Cowpatch, bodyslamming himself into Foxstrike and knocking him down.

"Reinforcements are on the way!" He told Swiftcloud as he started tussling with the Treeclan tom. Within a few heartbeats, the rest of Grassclan's Spies and Fighters had arrived. Swiftcloud decided to throw herself onto Magpietail before any other cat could, pinning the molly down, sheathing her claws. This close, Swiftcloud could make out the slight bulge in the molly's belly under her long white and black patched fur.

"Listen," she hissed quietly in Magpietail's ear, making motions as if she actually were fighting her. "I know what's been going on between you and Gingerstrike. And I know you're expecting. I don't want to hurt you, or for anyone else to, for that matter. Please, for the sake of your kits, run home."
Magpietail looked up at Swiftcloud with wide eyes. She kicked up her back legs, claws in, and halfheartedly threw Swiftcloud off of her. As she jumped her her paws, she mouthed a "thank you" to the other molly, before scaling a tree and disappearing from sight. Swiftcloud smiled, feeling good that she'd helped the expecting mother. Just because they were from rival clans didn't mean she had to be cruel. Even if the Warrior Code told her that in battle they

were enemies. The Code also said not to harm kits, or to ignore any in need. Helping Magpietail escape was just as much about honoring the Code as it was breaking it. Besides, Swiftcloud knew if anything bad happened to Magpietail or her kits, Gingerstrike would be devastated. He'd lost enough recently with the death of his older sister.
Speaking of Gingerstrike, the ruddy ginger tom came running towards Swiftcloud just as the last traces of his mate disappeared into the branches above.

"What happened to Magpietail?" He demanded to know.

"Lower your voice," Swiftcloud hissed, flaring her nostrils. She dropped her own tone so it was hardly above a whisper. "She's fine. I didn't actually attack her. I told her to go home so that she and the kits would be safe."

Gingerstrike blinked with surprise. "T..thank you," he mewed. "That means a lot to me. That she's safe."

"I know. C'mon, we can't keep standing around here, I smell a Treeclan battle party coming."

"Starclan willing, our battle party will be arriving soon as well."
As if his words had triggered their arrival, Treeclan cats came diving down from the canopy above. Swiftcloud jumped back, prompting the other warrior to run off and find his partner, just like she planned to do. The white and black patch molly dashed off into the crowd, searching the pelts of the battling cats surrounding her for Shadowfang. *Is he safe?* she wondered, whipping her head around.
By the sidelines, next to a shedding birch tree, Swiftcloud spotted the black tom on the floor. He was pinned, eyes narrowed up at the smoke black cat who was assaulting his underbelly. A knot formed in Swiftcloud's belly as she recognized the warrior. It was Thornberry, Treeclan's own deputy. Shadowfang was having his tail handed to him by the higher ranking enemy, yowling out in pain as his skin was torn into by powerful back legs. Swiftcloud pelted over in an instant, lowering her head and colliding it with Thornberry's flank. An airless gasp escaped the smoke tom as he fell off the Grassclan Fighter, the wind seeming to have been knocked out of

him. Swiftcloud dropped beside Shadowfang, nudging him and urging him to his paws while they had a moment.

"Run home. You're not fit enough to fight."

"Swiftcloud-"

"Don't argue! You're bleeding, and hardly able to hold your own. I know you want to fight. I know you don't want to leave me alone. But you'll end up getting yourself killed at this rate. *Please*, Shadowfang."

Shadowfang hesitated, brow furrowing. "...Fine. But you better make it home in one piece."

Swiftcloud bumped her forehead against his gently. "I will. Now go!"
Shadowfang scrambled to his paws at his mate's command, sprinting off in the direction of home. Swiftcloud watched him go, her guard down long enough for Thornberry to get the jump on her. "Oof!" Swiftcloud felt a hard blow against her side, her head whipping around to glare at the Treeclan deputy who now towered above her. A smug smirk was settled on his muzzle. Swiftcloud's lip curled up into a snarl at the sight, her paw raising instinctively to swipe at the tom's face. Thornberry let out a short yowl of pain when claws made contact with skin, making him take a pace back. This gave Swiftcloud the oppurtuniry to get back onto her feet. On all fours, she dropped into a hunter's crouch, narrowing her eyes at the tom who mirrored her stance. They seemed equally matched at this moment, though this did not bring Swiftcloud any assurance. She wouldn't allow herself get cocky in the face of a possible victory, for fear of turning it into a defeat. Her guard must stay up. She must win this fight.
Swiftcloud was the first to make a move, leaping at Thornberry who rolled to move out of her way. When she landed, Swiftcloud swung around in time to have her ear nearly clawed. Luckily she was fast enough to jerk her head away and save her good ear from injury. Hissing, Swiftcloud threw herself at the enemy again, bowling him over. The two cats wrestled on the ground for a while, Swiftcloud's hind legs kicking into Thornberry, and Thornberry's jaws making contact with Swiftcloud's forepaw. Swiftcloud let out a pained yelp

and shook the deputy off of her. Thornberry stepped back, long fur bristled menacingly. His yellow eyes kept trained on the younger cat as she staggered to her paws again, ragged pants echoing through her chest and out her mouth.
Exhaustion struck Swiftcloud like a branch to the nose. How much fighting would she have to put up with before her body gave out? This was not what she'd asked for when she requested the jobs of Hunter and Spy before her warrior's ceremony. But she had promised to fight, regardless of the position she held. To protect and defend the clan was the sworn oath of a warrior. No matter the fatigue, no matter the pain, she must press on.
While Swiftcloud gave herself another mental pep-talk, Thornberry kept on her, anticipating another move, or waiting for the perfect moment to strike. But as much as Swiftcloud tried to encourage herself, she physically couldn't convince her limbs to move. She needed a rest, at least a small oppurtunity to catch her breath. But Swiftcloud knew she couldn't be granted such luxury.
Thornberry grew impatient of waiting. He growled deeply, wiggling his nubby tail before lunging to pounce on the young warrior again. Swiftcloud braced herself for the attack, squeezing her eyes shut and crouching to the ground. But when she peaked an eye open again, she was shocked to see Thornberry struggling. He was snarling, whirling around and shaking himself in an attempt to throw a cat off of his back. Tuilppaw had joined the fray, clinging to the enemy deputy while she kicked into his hide with her back paws. She looked over at her mentor with wide eyes which seemed to glow with exhilaration. Unlike Swiftcloud, it seemed Tulippaw found great thrill in a fight. She would make an excellent Fighting warrior someday, especially with being so bold as to attack Treeclan's deputy even at such a young age. Swiftcloud felt some pride from that, but knew that confidence and skill so far had mostly come from Ambereye. Swiftcloud wondered if the amber she-cat was watching their battle right now.

"Tulippaw!" Swiftcloud yowled, forcing herself to stand. "Bite into Thornberry's scruff and push all your weight onto him."

Tulippaw grinned at the command, following her mentor's directions exactly. Thornberry stopped whipping around as much, weighed down by the apprentice who seemed reluctant to quit.

Swiftcloud readied herself to help the young molly, narrowing her eyes at the enemy cat. She bolted forward, swiping out her good forepaw to trip up Thornberry's front paws, causing him to lose some balance. Then she turned like a snake, kicking out her back legs to knock the tom's from under him. With a loud thump, Thornberry came crashing down to the forest floor. Tulippaw pulled back to caterwaule triumphantly before Swiftcloud shooed her away with a jerk of her head. Tuilppaw seemed unwilling to abandon her mentor however, choosing to grab hold of Thornberry's scruff once more to help hold him down. Swiftcloud took this chance to jump onto the deputy, pressing him to the floor. He tensed, glaring up at the enemy warrior with despise.
For a few moments, Swiftcloud was able to get a good look at Thornberry's face. The deputy's eyes seemed a bit foggy, the furry edges around his sclera looking puffy and covered in tiny particles of crust, like the tom had not slept or cleaned his face properly this morning. Fatigue also shone in his expression no matter how aggressive the tom tried to appear. No matter what, all three cats knew that the high ranking warrior was defeated. After another heartbeat, Thornberry allowed himself to go limp, glancing away from Swiftcloud in defeat. Swiftcloud squared her shoulders, lifting her head enough so cats around them could hear her as she spoke, but keeping it low enough that her words seemed to be directed at Thornberry.

"Get off our territory!" She snarled, lifting a paw to give the black smoke tom's shoulder a slash for good measure. Tulippaw released the deputy from her grip as Swiftcloud kicked him out from under her. Thornberry rolled a bit from the force of the blow, shakily rising to his paws. He yowled, calling to his cats to fall back and retreat. The black smoke tom did not waste time to see if his warriors were following, choosing to take off up the nearest tree and out of sight as quickly as possible. Swiftcloud yowled out in victory, quickly followed by her apprentice. She took Tuilppaw with her to mark the nearest tree, glancing around to see the rest of Grassclan following suit. Across the clearing about a bear-length away, Swiftcloud caught Chicorynose gazing in her direction. Pride seemed to shine on her fawn features as the pair locked eyes for a few heartbeats. As if telepathically the two mollies shared the same thought. *This victory was because of me*, Swiftcloud realized with

pride, unable to contain her purring.

Chapter 33

Howls of victory echoed around the camp as warriors streamed through the bramble tunnel. A surge of energy seemed to ripple through ever cat as the patrol settled in to heal and discuss the battle.

"That was awesome!" Tulippaw caterwauled, running a couple laps around Swiftcloud. Swiftcloud limped with head held high, a smile gracing her features. She'd faced off against Treeclan's deputy almost by herself, and *won*. Perhaps she should give herself more credit for her fighting abilities, just as Mistypaw said. Then again, perhaps Thornberry was having an off day.

"You did great today, Tulippaw."

"Me? What about *you*? You should have seen yourself fighting off that stinky Treeclan cat. He was like 'I'm going to defeat you!' And you were all like 'No way I'm backing down from a fight; especially against a sticky sap sipper like you.' And then you tackled him! And he was like 'grr' and you were all 'hiss, get off our territory' and sent that tom running." Tulippaw leaped around dramatically as she reenacted the scuffle, changing the pitch in her tone humorously to mimic the voices of Swiftcloud and Thornberry. Swiftcloud let out a *mrrow* of laughter, playfully knocking her apprentice over with the swipe of a paw.

"Ok ok, I did great today too. What say we get some fresh-kill and go tell Cricketsong about everything that happened, hm?"

Tulippaw nodded enthusiastically, crouching and bunching her haunches. "Race you!" She challenged, springing forward and pelting to the fresh-kill pile. Swiftcloud chuckled, hobbling over more slowly. She didn't mind letting Tulippaw win this time. Besides, her shoulder was hurting again. The wound didn't seem to be reopened, but Swiftcloud would make sure to have it checked out later. Her forepaw was still oozing blood though. That wound needed more urgent care. Swiftcloud made a mental note to have it

patched up after eating.
By the time Swiftcloud made it to the pile, Tulippaw was already standing there, three mice placed in fron of her.

"Come on, turtle-foot, let's go to the nursery."

"Lead the way," Swiftcloud mewed, padding a tail-length behind the apprentice. Cloverpetal and Quailbelly were standing near the nursery's entrance when they approached, their bodies blocking the way inside. It seemed like the pair were reinforcing the den. Cloverpetal stood on the younger she-cat's back, twisting thick branches, ferns, and wool in between gaps in the bush. Meanwhile, Quailbelly passed up materials, all while keeping a firm stance on the ground. The honeysuckle bush was looking more thin as the season of Leafbare drew nearer. It's leaves were beginning to die off, browning and shriveled just as the flowers were. Swiftcloud worried if the den would be insulated enough to keep the queens and kits warm. But she reassured herself quietly; the Den Keepers knew how to thicken the walls enough to keep the cold out.

"Excuse us," Swiftcloud meowed.

Cloverpetal looked down towards the visitors, her tail raising. "Oh, hello! We're not in the way, are we?"

"Just a little bit. Could we get inside, please?"

"Oh yes of course. I think this part of the den is built up enough anyhow. We shouldn't be in your way anymore. Come on, Quailbelly, lets work on the back." With an elegant leap, Cloverpetal was on the ground, speaking to her companion before shortly leading her away. Swiftcloud purred a thank you in their direction, ducking into the nursery right after Tulippaw. But something was going on. The brown and white apprentice hesitated by the nursery's threshold, ears lowering slightly. She placed her two mice by her paws, looking back at Swiftcloud.

"Uhh, maybe..we should come back another time."

Swiftcloud tilted her head, utterly confused. "Why?"

"Just...because. And I don't really think I'm that hungry. Actually, I think I might go take a nap. Is that ok?"

Swiftcloud blinked, wiggling her tail. "Um. Sure I guess? If that's what you want to do."
Tulippaw nodded, picking up her share of prey to redeposit on the pile before padding over and into the apprentice's den. Swiftcloud watched her the whole time before turning and picking up the leftover mouse to give to Cricketsong. As she made her way into the nursery, Swiftcloud was surprised to find other cats visiting the queens. Pollenpaw, Nectarpaw, and Lilacpaw were gathered around their mother, chatting with her and Jaybird as they all shared a meal together. Had this been why Tulippaw did not want to come inside? Without thinking Swiftcloud turned out of the nursery, scurrying across camp and into the apprentice's den. The den was almost completely empty, Tulippaw being the only occupant. She lay curled in her nest, nose tucked beneath her brown and white tipped tail.

"Tulippaw?" No answer. Swiftcloud padded over to her apprentice, placing one of the mice in front of her nest, and the other in front of herself. "Do you want to tell me what's wrong?" Again there was no reply. Swiftcloud let out a hum. "Does it have to do with your sisters?"
At this question, Tulippaw raised her head to look at her mentor. Swiftcloud nodded, taking a seat. "Thought so. Why don't you tell me what's going on between you four."

"...Nectarpaw and Lilacpaw don't like spending time with me anymore. They say I'm still too much like a kit, and they don't hang out with kits. They always run away if I come near, or call me names if they can't get away. Pollenpaw is still nice to me though, but only when the others aren't around."

Swiftcloud let out a knowledgeable hum. "I understand. I was the oddball of my litter too."

"You were?" Tulippaw seemed surprised, and Swiftcloud had to suppress the giggle she wanted to give in reaction.

"Mhm. I was born into a family of show cats. They're special

kittypets who are bred by Twolegs to be the most perfect of their kind and to be shown off to other Twolegs. But as much as I wanted to be good, I wasn't cut out for that kind of life. My siblings would make fun of me because I was more interested in playing and getting dirty than staying clean and being a good show cat. And I wasn't as proper as they were. I wanted to learn to hunt and fight while they wanted to learn how to earn rewards and praise. So they'd tease me about it. Call me kit-brained and no better than a stray. They'd get me in trouble with our parents a lot, too." Swiftcloud sighed through her nose, glancing away. She lifted her injured forepaw, giving it a few vigorous licks to clear away the blood and to calm her nerves. "It hurt, knowing my brothers and sister didn't like me. But I knew what they thought of me didn't matter. I've still made something of myself. Maybe I'm not a show cat, but I'd say I'm a pretty good warrior."

"You're the best warrior," Tulippaw piped with a meek smile.

"Thanks for thinking so." Swiftpaw smiled, putting her paw down gingerly. "Anyways, my point is maybe you're not what they think you should be. Just be the best you that you can be. Don't let your sisters keep you down. But if they continue teasing you, tell me. I'll talk to them. Or I'll have Chicorynose talk to them."

Tulippaw nodded. "Thanks, Swiftcloud."

"No problem. Now, are you suuure you aren't hungry?"

Tulippaw smiled, bending down to dig into the mouse Swiftcloud had brought.

***

Night cast itself upon the clearing, illuminated by the light of the half moon. Swiftcloud sat outside the warrior's den staring up at the sky. Silverpelt glittered above her head, winking down at her from the starry hunting grounds above. It was a peaceful evening, and an important one too. Mistypaw was being made a full medicine cat tonight. All the Land's Star's medicine cats would be in attendance. Swiftcloud couldn't help but feel envious; she wanted to be there to see Mistypaw named too. Alas, she would have to wait until the

healers returned.

"Are you coming?" Shadowfang called as he popped out of the warrior's den. He'd come to collect his mate, hobbling up to sit by her side. "What are you up to?"

"Stargazing," Swiftcloud deadpanned, not turning her muzzle from the sky. A heavy gust of wind blew through their fur.

"Aren't you cold?" Shadowfang moved over to press his flank into hers. A sigh of relief escaped Swiftcloud, one she hadn't known she'd been holding.

"Yeah, a little," she confessed. Shadowfang rubbed his muzzle against hers.

"C'mon, let's get some sleep. We've had a busy day."
Swiftcloud nodded, fatigue greeting her as if it'd been waiting to be acknowledged first. Shadowfang stood, flicking his tail to prompt his mate to come along. Swiftcloud rose as well, following him into the den. The couple curled up together in their shared nest, allowing sleep to take them.

A while passed. Swiftcloud suddenly jumped to her paws right from her slumber. The patched molly whipped her head around as she tried to gain back full consciousness. A loud yowl pierced through the night air, causing her to bristle. At first, Swiftcloud had thought the noise had come from her dream. But after a heartbeat she realized the sound was real. Shadowfang had jolted awake by this point as well, looking from the den's entrance to Swiftcloud and back.

"Intruders!" A guard caterwauled from outside, startling the rest of Grassclan's sleeping warriors awake. The smell of sap and bark flooded Swiftcloud's nostrils making her growl. It was a Treeclan raid.

"Everyone, get up!" She commanded. When she turned to move, her shoulder instantly started to burn, as if it had been set on fire. Her paw was no better as she put pressure on it through her stance. Swiftcloud winced, biting back a hiss as she forced herself to lead

the charge out of the den. No amount of pain would stop her from defending the clan. Shadowfang was right on her heels, as well as Ladybugbite, Cowpatch, and the rest of the warriors.
Swiftcloud threw herself into the fray immediately, catching a passing black and grey tabby. She swiped at the other she-cat, lunging to sink her teeth into an outstretched thigh. The grey tabby turned on her, gaping her jaws in an attempt to bite back. Swiftcloud was smaller than this cat, having an easy time twisting and maneuvering to avoid her sharp fangs. Shadowfang grabbed hold of the enemy's back while she was distracted, clawing at her until the warrior was wailing for mercy. He used his strength to push her to the ground, forcing her into surrender. After a hiss of warning from the both of them, Swiftcloud and her partner threw the cat away, sending her pelting towards the bramble barrier.
There was a brief moment where Swiftcloud could breathe and take in the scene going on around her. Tornface and Meadowcall had emerged from the elders den, teaming up to fight against a large black spotted tom. The old white warrior was standing on his hind legs, swinging his front paws down to claw at the young warrior's face. Meadowcall then tackled the spotted warrior to the ground, pummeling his exposed underbelly. A short distance away the queens had come to fight, too. Cricketsong, Chicorynose, and Jaybird were up against Robinspots and Foxstrike, whom Swiftcloud recognized from earlier that day. The three mollies passed the enemies around like prey, each taking a turn to strike at them. At the nursery's entrance stood Ashwhisker tall and proud, a yowl escaping him like a roar from a Lionclan leader. It was easy to hear his declaration even from across the camp.

"You will not come *anywhere* near these kits, you fox-hearts!"
This startled the cats who dared to approach him, but did not stop them in their pursuits. Ashwhisker hurled himself onto Fogbreath, taking the much larger tom down onto his side in a single hit. Rosebloom was there to provide backup, taking the Den Mother's place in front of the honeysuckle bush. Then closer to Swiftcloud there was Tulippaw, slipping beneath Batwing in an attempt to reach her mentor.

"Swiftcloud!"

"Let's help!" Shadowfang decided, springing forward to aid the apprentice. Swiftcloud followed along, reaching for Tulippaw as the black tom wrestled Batwing to the ground.

"Are you ok?" Swiftcloud checked, sniffing Tulippaw over for any wounds. Tulippaw shook out her ruffled pelt.

"Yeah, I'm alright. Why is Treeclan invading our camp?"

"It must be revenge for us claiming some of the Forest Patch earlier. C'mon, there's no time to chat now. Find another apprentice to pair up with. Like...oh! Look, Pansypaw's alone. Hey Pansypaw!" Pansypaw whipped around at the sound of her name, rushing over to the two she-cats from a fox-length away.

"Hello, Swiftcloud," she greeted, sounding a bit breathless. Swiftcloud twitched her whiskers in acknowledgement.

"Work with Tulippaw. Don't leave each other's sides, alright?" The apprentices nodded. Swiftcloud nudged each on the shoulder sending them on their way before turning back to Shadowfang. Shadowfang nodded his head towards the crowd, prompting the partners to rejoin the fight. A ginger and white tom stuck out, all alone, trying to go towards the Tall Stone. Swiftcloud came around and stopped him in his tracks, leaping onto his shoulders while his back was turned. It took the pressure of all her weight to bring the cat down onto the ground, but it didn't take very long for it to happen. The tom let out a yowl of surprise, struggling beneath her. Swiftcloud scored her claws along his shoulders and back as he slowly slipped away. When he stood, Shadowfang was there to greet him, smacking the warrior across the muzzle with his claws.

"Sunflower!" A caterwaul of worry came from across the way. Tigerlily came barreling over, her pelt fluffed to make her appear twice her size. She was enormous. At the sight of her Swiftcloud couldn't help but be reminded of the fox from several moons ago. And it seemed Shadowfang shared the same thought. He suddenly flew into a blind rage, attacking the tabby and white molly the same way that he had with the giant ginger creature from before. Only this time it was he who was injured and in need of rescuing. Swiftcloud sprang to her paws, standing by Shadowfang's side as he

swiped at Tigerlily's face. Swiftcloud ducked down, taking one of the enemy's legs between her jaws and biting hard. Tigerlily pulled back instantly, taking a few paces backwards. Blood dripped from a few gashes on her forehead, an eye shut to keep it from oozing into the sensitive area. Sunflower had returned now, but only briefly enough to retrieve his friend. Together the two warriors made their retreat, disappearing from sight through the brambles.

"Are you hurt?" Shadowfang asked through a pant, looking at Swiftcloud.

"Yes, but the wounds I have are from this morning. I'll be alright. What about you? How are your old wounds doing?"

"They sting like nettles," he confessed, gritting his teeth, "but I'll live."

"Go put yourself away in the medicine den, you'll get healed up again in there."

"No way. I'm not sitting around while Treeclan's here invading our camp. Especially not with you in the mix. I'm not in so much pain that I can't stand and fight. I'm staying with you." Shadowfang raised his head, standing taller in an attempt to seem stronger. But Swiftcloud could see the exhaustion in his eyes. He wasn't in the best condition to fight. But she knew there'd be no way to get him to back down right now.

"Fine. Let's go help Tigerfang defend his den," she suggested, heading forward. Shadowfang came right along with her, matching her pace until they came to stop by his old mentor. Tigerfang was taking a moment to stick his head into Tall Stone's crack, checking on his kits who hid inside.

"How are Lightkit and Thornkit?" Asked Swiftcloud, concerned.

"They're fine now," answered the tabby pulling his head back out of the den. "A warrior tried to fight Thornkit. Probably thought he was an apprentice. The little furball would have gladly tried fighting her too if I hadn't been here to warn her off. Neither of the kits are hurt though, thank Starclan."

"Good. If I get to speak to Whitestar I'll let her know," Swiftcloud offered.

"Look out, we've got company," was the warning Shadowfang gave as Nightshade, Pepperpatch, and Greytuft approached. The she cats' hackles were raised and teeth were bared; they looked ready to shred the Grassclan warriors to pieces.

"So we meet again." Nightshade grinned, eyes icy and cold. Swiftcloud lowered her ears. "I'm going to take great pleasure in clawing you up."

"Who says I'll be the one getting clawed?" Swiftcloud prompted, raising her head. This only served to make Nightshade grin more. A dark chuckle escaped the black molly, her claws unsheathing as she took a few more paces forward.

"Confident aren't we, kittypet? Let's see how bold you are when I tear off the rest of that little stump you call a tail." At once, Nightshade threw herself at Swiftcloud, bowling her over. Tigerfang and Shadowfang jumped out of the way, scurrying off to face the other opposing mollies.
Swiftcloud yowled furiously as Nightshade grabbed the patched she-cat's scruff, shaking her like a piece of moss. Swiftcloud flailed her paws, landing a lucky scratch or two on Nightshade's eye. The black she-cat yelped, pulling back to save her face from further injury. Free, Swiftcloud jumped back onto her paws. In retaliation, Nightshade smacked Swiftcloud's muzzle. Tiny beads of blood swelled out from the cuts the enemy warrior had made. Swiftcloud growled, headbutting her foe. Both mollies fell to the floor again, tussling, clawing at one another. Fur and blood was flying all over the place, painting the grass and earth beneath them. The pair were evenly matched. But there had to be only one winner.
With all the strength she could muster, Swiftcloud pressed down on Nightshade, who now lay beneath her. Swiftcloud dug her front claws into each of the other cat's shoulders, hind claws pressing dangerously into her fragile underbelly. Nightshade looked up at the other she-cat, pure malice glowing in her blue eyes. Swiftcloud held her gaze, drawing her lips back into a fearsome snarl. A tense heartbeat past, then another. Yet Nightshade did not budge. It seemed as if the black she cat had accepted her defeat.

"You've lost, Nightshade. Go home," Swiftcloud demanded, stepping off of her enemy without taking her eyes off of her. Nightshade rose onto her paws with a tremble. She panted, a smirk forming on her muzzle.

"You really think you've beaten me?" She chuckled darkly, confusing Swiftcloud. Before the patched she-cat could even register what was going on, she felt jaws grasp her scruff from behind. Swiftcloud could only catch a glimpse of her captor from the corner of her eye. Thornberry had joined in this battle, taking her by surprise. His face was dirty, eyes dull but fiery with hate. Despite not looking his best, the tom sure was powerful.
Swiftcloud struggled in the smokey tom's grip, her efforts pointless as she barely budged. Thornberry lifted her from the ground, throwing her in the direction of the medicine den. The last sight Swiftcloud saw was the grooves of the treebark before everything fell dark.

Chapter 34

Throbbing pain greeted Swiftcloud when consciousness return to her. Her ears were ringing so loud she could barely hear the thoughts circling within her own mind. With effort, the white and black patched she-cat peeled open her eyes. She blinked, adjusting to the harsh light that managed to sneak in behind the ivy tendrils blocking the den's entrance.
Goldensong and Mistypaw were sitting a tail-length in front of her, talking about who knows what. Herbs, maybe. Swiftcloud couldn't tell; their words sounded muffled and distant in her ears. Clearly she hadn't fully woken up yet. When she blinked, the medicine cats were talking. When she blinked again they had turned, landing their focus onto her.

"...ear me?" Swiftcloud barely managed to catch the last couple of words Goldensong spoke. The warrior flicked her ears, straining them to focus.

"Swiftcloud." She heard Mistypaw's mew, which grew clearer with every word. "Can you hear us?"

"Y..yes," she managed to respond, head pounding. "Ngh...where am I...?"

"You're in the medicine den," responded Mistypaw. Goldensong gently nudged her aside to sit directly in front of Swiftcloud.

"Follow my movements with your eyes," the golden molly instructed, lifting her tail. She slowly moved it in the air to the right, then back towards her left side with the same speed. Swiftcloud watched closely, wondering what this was about. "Good. Now flex your claws for me, please. One paw at a time, then all four if you can." Swiftcloud followed the directions. "Very good." Goldensong extended her paw, placing it on the pad of Swiftcloud's. "

Now squeeze my paw, squeeze as hard as you can. Don't worry

about your claws for the moment, I won't mind if I get pricked by them a little."
Though she was hesitant, Swiftcloud flexed her toes. She felt the fuzziness of the golden molly's fur on her pawpad as she tensed her muscles to grip as tight as she could manage. Goldensong nodded, pulling back after a couple of heartbeats.
"Do you know what your name is?" She asked.

The patched warrior blinked, utterly perplexed. "My name is Swiftcloud," she responded surely.

"What clan do you hail from?"

"I'm from Grassclan," Swiftcloud answered without even having to think.

"What is your rank?"

"I'm a young warrior. A Hunter, and Spy. And a mentor."

Goldensong nodded once more. "Excellent. It seems that there is no serious damage to your brain. Though I wonder, how does your head feel?"

"It hurts. There's a drumming in the top of my skull like thunder. And... the light, it's killing my eyes."

"Sounds like a concussion," Mistypaw concluded, poking her claw against the base of Swiftcloud's neck. Swiftcloud jolted, yelping in surprise. Her legs kicked out in response, her warrior instincts making her poised for a battle that wouldn't happen. Mistyleaf let out a tiny giggle, mewing an apology. "Seems like she isn't paralyzed either. That's a huge relief."

"Indeed. But, unfortunately, she isn't fit enough for her warrior duties."

"Why? What's going on?" Swiftcloud was desperate to know. What was with all these questions and tests?

"You hit your head against our den and fell unconscious," Goldensong answered simply.

"I...I was battling against Nightshade. And then Thornberry came out of nowhere.. and he threw me," Swiftcloud remembered.

"Sounds about right with what Tigerfang said," Mistypaw mused, whiskers twitching.

"Your neck and shoulder have been torn quite severely on top of that concussion of yours," Goldensong meowed. "You'll have to stay within the confines of camp untill you've healed."

"But what about hunting? Leafbare is just around the corner, I..I have to be able to hold my keep!"

"Settle down," Mistypaw soothed, placing herself by her friend's side. She purred deeply in an attempt to calm Swiftcloud's nerves. "I'm sure there's plenty you can do in camp. You like spending time with the queens, right? I'm sure they'd appreciate the extra help around the nursery. Meanwhile, the apprentices can do the hunting for you."

"The apprentices...oh no, Tulippaw! What's going to happen to Tulippaw while I'm stuck here?"

"You can have one of the other mentors handle her training for the time being," Goldensong replied.

"But she's *my* apprentice. I promised Ambereye I would take care of her..." Swiftcloud rested her chin on her paws, ears lowering with disappointment.

"Then maybe she could still teach her when Tulippaw is in camp? And then outside the camp another warrior can keep an eye on her," Mistypaw suggested. "Would that work?"

"Hm, well, I don't see why not," Goldensong mewed. "As long as Swiftcloud does not overexert herself or open her wounds, it should be fine."
Swiftcloud perked up at the idea, her eyes glittering with hope and gratitude.
"But you should worry about Tulippaw's training later. For today, at least, you should rest." Goldensong turned her attention onto

Swiftcloud for a few heartbeats before turning back to her apprentice. "Mistyleaf, will you take care of Swiftcloud's treatment while I speak to Whitestar about her condition?"

"Of course, Goldensong," Mistyleaf replied, standing with a stretch. As the golden she-cat turned and walked away, Mistyleaf nudged Swiftcloud to her paws. She assisted her with walking, setting her down in a nest deep in the den. It was dark here, no sunlight seemed to be able to reach this far back. Relief came to Swiftcloud's eyes in the shade, and the drumming in her head seemed to dull, if only slightly. As the patched warrior made herself more comfortable, Mistyleaf turned, returning a few moments later with a pair of poppy seeds and few flowers which looked like tiny daisies. The fragrance from them could only be described as sharp and tangy.

"Eat these, they'll help with your head and give you good rest."

Swiftcloud nodded, licking up the herbs without a second thought. She shivered in disgust as the plants slithered down her throat, bitter on her taste buds. A wad of soaked moss was provided to her to wash out the taste. She lapped up the water greedily, receiving a pat on the head by Mistyleaf's tail. The medicine cat apprentice turned once more, leaving Swiftcloud alone in the peace and quiet. Drowsiness claimed her before she could even realize the poppy seeds had taken effect. Her head drooped and eyes closed as sleep welcomed her into its relm, blanketing her with comfort and entertaining her with sweet dreams.

***

"Are we really going to let those fox-hearts take advantage of us again?" An outcry came from beyond the medicine den, pulling Swiftcloud from her slumber. Swiftcloud rose to her paws with a painful stretch, hobbling to the den's entrance. Outside she spotted Ashwhisker speaking, his ear torn and flanks still bloody. "They busted into our camp, attacked our injured warriors, and nearly fought an innocent kit. We have to make them pay!"
Yowls of agreement came from clanmates all around camp. It would appear that Whitestar called a meeting. But no cat seemed happy with how she was treating the invasion. The clan wanted revenge,

to go after the cats that had woken them in the middle of the night for a needless battle. But Whitestar forbade it.

"Isn't their defeat enough?" Cloverpetal piped meekly in defence of the clan leader's choice. A few cats around her hissed, making her shrink back.

"You are correct, Cloverpetal," Whitestar responded calmly, "but it won't be enough to stop them for good. We will give it a few days, so that we may have time to recover and plan, and then we will strike back once again."

"But what if Treeclan comes back?" Heatherwing queried.

"I highly doubt they'll be so quick to invade Grassclan's camp again after the beating we gave them. Besides, they know we'll be expecting their return," Tigerfang commented.

"Regardless, I will ask that more guards keep watch over camp. Just in case some Treeclan warriors are still feeling bold. For now though, everyone should get some rest."
Whitestar dipped her head to her warriors. Then she jumped down from Tall Stone, marking the end of the meeting. Swiftcloud watched as Whitestar mewed a little bit by the entrance of her den, summoning her son out from inside. Swiftcloud could no longer hear what the leader was saying, but she guessed she was telling Thornkit to get himself examined by the medicine cats. Snowfrost gave the little tom a quick look over, padding to her den to undoubtedly gather supplies. Swiftcloud stepped aside to allow her to enter. She watched the lynx point molly as she sorted through her herb supply, a sour look on her face.

"Stars, did no one think to check the medicine den?" Snowfrost yowled as she rudely pushed past her guest to reemerge into the clearing. "Our herb stores have been raided. Half of our supplies are gone or destroyed!"

"Do we still have enough marigolds and cobweb?" Goldensong quiered as she walked over to investigate.

"Thankfully, yes. But we'll have to fetch more later today."

Goldensong nodded in understanding, following her former mentor back into the hollow tree. Swiftcloud sat in place and observed the medicine cats as they worked. Were their herbs really taken? And if so, how did Goldensong and Mistyleaf not notice earlier?

"Swiftcloud." The warrior turned in response to the cat who called her. Mistyleaf had come to stand in front of her, a soft smile on her face. Her eyes twinkled and fur glittered in the light of the day. She looked stunning. She seemed so much more grown up than before. Swiftcloud walked forward to emerge fully into camp.

"Hello Mistyleaf," Swiftcloud purred her friend's new name, adoring the sound of it. "How are you? Did your ceremony go well?"

"I'm well, thank you. And yes. It was lovely. I'm afraid I can't share much of the details though."

"That's alright. I wish I could've been there to see it. But I'm glad you were given such a beautiful name. Not..not that any other name you might have gotten wouldn't have as pretty! I just mean-"

Swiftcloud was cut off by Mistyleaf's giggling, followed by a lick to her cheek. "I know."
Swiftcloud's fur felt like it had caught fire, her skin hot with emotion. Flustered, she bowed her head, unable to meet the other molly's gaze. This only caused Mistyleaf to giggle more. She flicked her tail under Swiftcloud's chin, prompting her to lift if.
"How are you feeling by the way? How is your head?"

"It doesn't hurt as much anymore. But I'm still pretty sore," Swiftcloud confessed.

"I thought you'd say that. Well, make sure you take it easy, alright? I have to go check on some other cats. We'll catch up more later."
With a nose touch and a wave of her tail, Mistyleaf walked away. After a heartbeat, Swiftcloud did the same.
By the warrior's den she saw the shape of Shadowfang sitting as his wounds were being checked. Ashwhisker studied the black tom carefully.

"You need to stay off you paws for a while, bunny," he chided,

touching his nose to Shadowfang's leg. "You've been injured too greatly and too often to keep joining battles. If you don't give yourself time to heal you'll wind up having to retire early. You don't want that do you?"

Shadowfang hunched over self consciously. He looked a little guilty, although Swiftcloud could still notice a small twinkle of mischief in his green eyes. "No, no of course not."

"Then you'll stay in camp. If I have to move you to my den just to make sure you don't go volunteering to join any more raids, I will." Ashwhisker turned. "Swiftcloud, make sure this tom of yours heeds my words. This is serious business."

"Dad, this is embarrassing. I'm not a kit anymore! I can take care of myself."

"Oh I'll keep my eye on him, you don't need to worry about that," Swiftcloud assured, licking Shadowfang's ear as she came to sit beside him. With her tongue she could feel the flustered heat that the tom must be feeling beneath his pelt. It was adorable.
Ashwhisker gave a satisfied grunt, rising to his paws and taking off to go check on some other clanmates.
Across the way, Swiftcloud spotted Dewstone. She was alone, and seemed to be obersving the activity of the clan. Though Swiftcloud wanted to be with her mate, there was something more important to attend to right now. *This might be the perfect opportunity to tell her my theory*.

"Hey, I have to go talk with Dewstone for a little while," Swiftcloud meowed as she stood up. "I'll catch up with you later." Shadowfang let out a grunt of acknowledgement, turning to clean himself as Swiftcloud marched forward on her mission.

"Dewstone, may I have a word?"

The white and silver patched molly perked up when she heard her own name. Her eyes flashed with interest at the sound of importance in the younger cat's mew. "Of course. What's on your mind, Swiftcloud?"

"I've been having some suspicious thoughts lately. About the deaths of some of our warriors. I think there may be a connection. A specific cat might be responsible, but I'm not sure who." Swiftcloud explained all of the overlapping evidence she had come up with in relation to the deaths of Waspwing, Butterflytail, and Ambereye. The way all three cats were positioned, the berry juice she'd found on two of the cats, and the connection to Treeclan.
"At first, I thought it might've been a Treeclan warrior who's killing our cats. But I know Butterflytail and Ambereye both came back and died in camp. So I started to think maybe...someone in Grassclan could be responsible. But now that Treeclan knows where our camp is, I'm not so sure anymore. However, I'm completely sure that *something* is going on. There's too much in common for it all to be coincidence."
Dewstone was quiet for a little while, her eyes flickering in contemplation. Her tail swished as she lifted her chin at last to address the warrior in front of her.

"You have brought forth some interesting information. Though it sounds more like a conspiracy than something credible. However, I will help you with this investigation, if only to see if your theories are correct. If someone is targeting our cats, then we will bring them to justice."

Chapter 35

It had been a difficult moon for Swiftcloud to bare through, but a full moon nonetheless. Staying in camp was harder than she'd remembered it being as an apprentice. But at least she was in good company. Shadowfang was still on nest-rest along with her, but appeared to be handling it better than Swiftcloud was. He seemed happy for the companionship, and for the chance to spend more quality time with his father, young siblings, and mate. Swiftcloud had to agree that it was enjoyable, but she missed being out in the meadow. She so badly wanted to run in the open fields, chasing rabbits, and training Tulippaw for battle. There wasn't enough space in camp for her to properly stretch her legs, and the medicine cats would yowl at her if she so much as tried to join in a playfight. Still, at least Swiftcloud was kept busy. Just because she was camp bound did not mean she did not have things to do, after all. Frequently, she had been called to sit in on strategy meetings; an honor that was usually only granted to the clan's most senior warriors. Whitestar seemed to value the young molly's input ever since she'd come up with the idea to push back the border; like Swiftcloud was some sort of master battle planner. But Swiftcloud didn't exactly understand why she was looked upon in this light. She wasn't much of a fighter herself. The strategizes she came up with didn't seem to be all that special either, any cat could think of them with enough information given. But Whitestar had faith in her, so Swiftcloud kept some faith in herself-even when she felt she shouldn't.

Beyond battle planning, Swiftcloud took some time to speak with Dewstone. Before, Dewstone had been very intrigued by Swiftcloud's theory that one cat may be responsible for the deaths of Waspwing, Butterflytail, and Ambereye. Between strategy meetings, Swiftcloud gave her opinions to the Code Keeper about the situation. Inside camp, she kept an eye out for suspicious activity. And outside of camp, Dewstone searched for anything unusual. She'd even follow battle patrols to the Forest Patch, just in case evidence may present itself. Or if another warrior fell victim to whoever it might be murdering Grassclan's cats. So far, both mollies

had come back without proof of anything. But Swiftcloud was certain there was something going on. She could feel it.
Beyond those obligations, Swiftcloud spent the rest of her time helping the queens by distracting the pluthera of kits in the nursery. They'd grown so big within a moon's time, doubling in size and intelligence faster than the blink of an eye. Most of the kits were talking already, and trying to escape from the bear-length of space they were allowed to travel from their den. Jaybird's kits already had names picked out, being referred to by their prefix for the time being while they awaited their official naming ceremony. Mint, Cinder, and Bunny were their names. It seemed Ashwhisker was fixed on a couple of names as well; Pigeon and Oriole. Good names for good kits, Swiftcloud thought when she had heard them. All the nursery members were good. Once or twice during her camp confinement, Swiftcloud had imagined herself joining the queens. What if during this time off she decided to take the opportunity to have her own litter? Was she even ready for kits? Shadowfang seemed to be happy with whatever decision she'd make, but Swiftcloud was still unsure if she was prepared for motherhood. Especially at this time. Leafbare was fast approaching, and war still hung heavy over their heads. Even though there was a perfect opening, perhaps now wasn't best for starting a family. For the time being, Swiftcloud was content to settle down and watch other cats' families form and grow.
Today, Swiftcloud watched the camp contently from the edge of her den. Across the way she saw Frostfeather lounging outside the nursery, Quailbelly's shoulder pressed gently against hers. The two she-cats were busy grooming one of Jaybird's kits each, while the third bounced and circled around them on clumsy paws. After nudging the silver tabby kit, Mint, off to play, Frostfeather stuck out her tail to block the silver and black tabby's path. With a nod of her head, Bunny reluctantly came to settle between her older sister's paws. The kit wiggled and whined as Frostfeather took her time cleaning her.

"Bunny, lift your ears please so I can clean them." The kit didn't seem to want to listen, antsy within Frostfeather's grasp. Thankfully the older molly was a patient cat, but at this point she seemed to be getting a little annoyed. "Settle down, you restless mollykit," she chided playfully.

"I'm not a molly!" Bunny proclaimed suddenly. He puffed up, wagging his striped plumy tail with indignation. Swiftcloud couldn't help but be reminded of Jaybird in the way he was posturing. Frostfeather blinked, smiling at Bunny with a soft purr of amusement.

"What do you mean...? Ooh. Of course, I understand. Now, would you settle down you rambunctious *tom*?"
The kit let out a tiny "hmph" as a sign of both satisfaction and surrender, allowing his sister to finish tidying his fur. His ears flopped back down when Frostfeather had finished cleaning them, much to her chagrin. "Would you like me to tell the clan about your identity?" She asked. The silver and black striped kit looked back at his sister and gave an excited nod, bounding off as soon as the opportunity was presented to him. Swiftcloud resisted letting out an audible *mrrow* of amusement.

"Hey Frostfeather," Rabbitstorm meowed from across camp, prancing over to his sister. He had an unusual bounce in his step, and his face was lit up like sunlight on water. The fluffy tom came to a stop in front of his littermate who looked up at him with curiosity.
"I have some amazing news!"

"Oh really? What is it?" Frostfeather wondered, amused by her brother's lightheartedness.

"Heatherwing's expecting kits. *My* kits!" He proclaimed, excitement oozing from every flealength of his being. Frostfeather jumped to her paws, trilling with delight. Quailbelly purred out a congratulations, standing and bounding away to be with her sister. Over by the medicine den, Swiftcloud saw the lilac molly in question. Heatherwing was standing with Whitestar, Cricketsong, and Chicorynose. Whitestar was rubbing her head affectionately against her younger sibling's, Quailbelly joining in as she caught up with her twin. The five sisters were having a conversation that could not be heard at this distance. They all appeared to be in high spirits. If she focused hard enough, Swiftcloud could barely make out the slight bulge of Heatherwing's belly. *She must be farther along than I thought.*

"Kits? Already?" Piped a voice. Snowfrost emerged from the nursery in one swift motion, drawing attention onto herself. Her tail-tip swayed with interest at the news, eyes narrowed skeptically. She must have been checking on Ashwhisker and Cricketsong's kits, overhearing the news as she readied herself to retire from the task.

"Yes! Goldensong says it'll probably be a large litter. Maybe with four or five kits," Rabbitstorm explained, the pride in his voice unmistakable.

"Wow! Congratulations, bunny!" Frostfeather purred. "I guess Heatherwing will be moving into the nursery soon, won't she?"

Rabbitstorm shook his head. "She's going to remain a warrior actually, and I've decided to become a queen. Heatherwing will nurse the kits, but I'll be the one to care for them."

"But what about your job as a guard?" Snowfrost fretted. "Will you return to your duties once the kits have been apprenticed?"

Once again, Rabbitstorm shook his head. "No...as much as I enjoy my job, and love being a warrior...I think I will like being a permanent nursery queen too. Mama will be proud, I think."

"Tch. You should not give up your career for this," Snowfrost warned. "You are a gifted fighter. And a great asset to the clan as a guard. We could do without another queen. But we cannot afford to allow good, strong cats like yourself to dedicate their time to kit rearing and emotional support. And there's a war going on; we need every claw in the fight that we can get. Or have you forgotten that?"

"This is my choice to make, Snowfrost," Rabbitstorm challenged. "I'll always be a great warrior. And I won't allow my skills to dull, either. I can be a queen and still be a great asset to our clan. I am simply changing my title, and taking on a second job. I'm not giving up anything. And if the clan should need me to fight, I'll fight with everything I have."

Snowfrost took a step back in surprise, disapproval gracing her sleek features. Her tail began to wag and her muzzle raised into the air with a small "*hmph*" in remark.

"You will regret this decision." Snowfrost almost sounded threatening. But Rabbitstorm remained calm despite his aunt's disapproval.

"If I do, that's for me to decide."

"What in Starclan's name is going on here?" Jaybird yowled by the fresh-kill pile. From the looks of it she had just returned from a hunting patrol, depositing an impressively sized rabbit to the food supply. The silver queen wasted no time stalking towards the group to join in their conversation. Her nostrils flared with exasperation and her tail swayed slowly behind her as she walked.
"I leave camp to stretch my legs for all of a heartbeat, and suddenly my kin starts to fight?"

"He's is being a mouse-brain," Snowfrost insisted.

"Snowfrost won't accept the fact that I'm going to become a queen when my kits are born."

"Kits? I didn't realize cats born toms could give birth to their own litters," Jaybird's voice sounded skeptical and playfully teasing.

"Heatherwing is expecting. I want to be the one to take care of our kits in the nursery," Rabbitstorm elaborated.

Jaybird's tone immediately shifted. "Oh bunny, that's fantastic! Congratulations!"

"You're encouraging this?" Snowfrost looked shocked.

"Of course. If that is what Rabbitstorm wants, then who am I to deny him? I want my son to be happy. He'll be a wonderful father, and a great queen. He has the same natural instinct as I do. He has my blood."

"And *mine*," Snowfrost snapped. She seemed utterly offended at Jaybird's remark, like the queen had threatened to poison her firstborn. But this confused Swiftcloud. Rabbitstorm and his littermates were adopted. Did Jaybird and Snowfrost only discuss their blood relations now because they were in front of the littermates?

"Mama, why don't we relax a while together; have some prey?" Frostfeather interjected, trying to diffuse the argument.

Jaybird glared at her sister a heartbeat longer before relaxing. She turned towards Frostfeather, her scowl raising into a polite smile. "Oh yes, that sounds lovely. Going on that patrol did leave me feeling quite famished."
Frostfeather purred in response, swaying her fluffy tail. She herded Jaybird's kits back into the nursery then headed with her mother to the fresh-kill pile. Swiftcloud rose from her spot by the warrior's den, deciding to join them. As she matched pace with Frostfeather she could feel the piercing eyes of Snowfost on the back of their heads. Swiftcloud spared a look over her shoulder to see the medicine cat tense and bristling. Anger glazed her eyes, her gaze snapping onto Rabbitstorm who jabbed her side with a paw. Snowfost jolted away from his touch, storming off to another part of camp to get away from the tom.
Swiftcloud gave her whiskers an indignant twitch as she returned her attention towards the fresh-kill pile. Tulippaw and Tigerfang were there when the warriors and queen arrived. The dark tabby was looking just as proud as the apprentice did, who sat with a bird by the tips of her paws.

"Look what I caught today, Swiftcloud!" Tulippaw exclaimed proudly, jestering towards the blue jay with her tail tip.

"I helped to hold an assessment today," Tigerfang informed. "Tulippaw hunted expertly. She's on her way to becoming a great Grassclan warrior. Though, of course, she still has a lot to learn."
That was a relief to hear. Despite Swiftcloud's confinement, it seemed Tulippaw was keeping on top of her lessons. Swiftcloud couldn't be more proud.

"Thank you for letting me know. I'll be sure to work on Tulippaw's weaker areas just as soon as Goldensong gives me the all clear to return to my duties. I don't think it'll be much longer, thankfully."

"Maybe you should get yourself examined soon, see what the medicine cats have to say about your wounds?," Tigerfang suggested.

"You know, that's actually a good idea. It's been a moon after all. I think I'll go do that," Swiftcloud responded.

"We'll catch up later, then," purred the tabby warrior, touching noses with his clanmate. "Come, Tulippaw, let's bring some of this prey to the elders."

"Yes Tigerfang," Tulippaw responded obediently, snatching up the rabbit Jaybird had brought home. She dragged the plump creature by it's leg, disappearing into the rock which housed the elders with Tigerfang. Swiftcloud purred approvingly before turning to her companions.

"Save me some prey please. I'll be back in a little bit."

"I'm sure there will be plenty left over when you come back," Jaybird mewed with a smile.

"Not with the way Frostfeather eats," Swiftcloud giggled, watching her friend snatch up the blue jay and begin tearing into it. She paused momentarily, plucking a long feather from the bird's wing. She moved close to her mother, inserting it into the fur by the base of the queen's tail.

"There. I think that looks pretty," Frostfeather purred. Jaybird twisted around to inspect her daughter's handiwork.

"Oh, it's beautiful. Thank you, precious, what a lovely gift," Jaybird trilled, rubbing her cheek against Frostfeather. Swiftcloud nodded in approval, turning away from the scene, making her way over to the medicine den.
Goldensong was inside the tree's trunk alone, sorting some fragrant herbs that made Swiftcloud's mouth water. The warrior politely cleared her throat, waiting for the medicine cat to take notice of her.

"Ah Swiftcloud, hello," Goldensong greeted as she stood up. "What can I do for you?"

"I was wondering if you could give me an exam. It's been a full moon, and I want know how much longer it will be until I can go

back to my warrior duties."
Goldensong let out a thoughtful hum, approaching the patched warrior. She first made Swiftcloud lift her chin, pulling back the cobwebs that had been packed on her wound a few days prior. Swiftcloud could feel the golden molly's nose poking the area, tickling her as Goldensong took quick sniffs. The medicine cat pulled back after a moment, moving to look at the other molly's shoulder.

"It looks like everything has closed up nicely. There's still some scabbing along your neck, but it should flake off within another day or so. I'd say you're well enough to get back to work."

Swiftcloud's pelt prickled with excitement. "Really!?"
Goldensong nodded approvingly. Giddy as a bird, Swiftcloud thanked the medicine cat kindly. She turned quick as a snake, prancing out of the den. She'd go on to have a bite to eat, then maybe out for a bit of training with Tulippaw.

Chapter 36

"Good morning, Swiftcloud," Chicorynose greeted her old apprentice as she and Tulippaw stepped out of the bramble tunnel, prey in their jaws. She waited for the pair to make their way over to the fresh-kill pile before continuing. "I'm surprised to see you've been out hunting today."

"Goldensong cleared me for duty yesterday, and Tigerfang invited Tulippaw and I on the dawn patrol," Swiftcloud informed as she dropped her prey at her paws. It felt wonderful to be able to do her warrior duties again. Swiftcloud hadn't been able to wait to get started working today, rousing Tulippaw as soon as the sun had risen.

"There's going to be another strategy meeting in the warrior's den shortly. Will you be joining, or would you rather spend time with your apprentice?" Chicorynose deadpanned as she picked her way through the newly stocked collection of food.

"Of course I will join. Tulippaw, why don't you go play with Pollenpaw?"

"Ok!" Tulippaw trilled, depositing her mole onto the prey pile. She darted off, surprise tackling her sister. The mollies squealed, scurrying off to go play somewhere. Swiftcloud chuckled, following Chicorynose into Whitestar's den. The rest of the senior warriors were already inside waiting.

"There you are," Whitestar meowed, "we were just wrapping up our plans for today."

"Plans?" Swiftcloud echoed.

"Yes. Remember yesterday morning when we discussed going forward with another Forest Patch invasion? Everyone has finally voted. At sunhigh, a patrol will be sent to Treeclan's territory." Swiftcloud's pelt prickled with anxiety at the plan, just as it had the

morning before. Swiftcloud had originally voted in favor of the idea, knowing that it would be just as successful as the last. But something kept nagging her. A terrible sensation, a feeling that something was going to go wrong. But Swiftcloud couldn't place her paw on what and, like before, kept silent about it.

"Who should I gather for the patrol?" Chicorynose asked.

"Slugsnout, Tigerfang, Heatherwing, Ladybugbite, Beetlepatch, Rabbitstorm, Gingerstrike, and all of our spies. The older apprentices may come too, if their mentors think they're ready. Meadowcall and Tornface have also graciously volunteered to come out of retirement to assist."
The elders are coming too? Swiftcloud realized just how serious the situation was.

"I'll alert the warriors immediately then," Chicorynose declared. "Shall I round up any medicine cats?"

"Yes," Whitestar responded. "Invite Snowfrost and Mistypaw along too." Chicorynose dipped her head in understanding. Whitestar gave a swish of her tail as a sign that the meeting was concluded. Swiftcloud followed Chicorynose out of the crack in Tall Stone, the clan's senior warriors padding behind. Though dread hung heavy over Swiftcloud's head, she didn't let it show. All she could do right now was pray to Starclan that this battle would end quickly.

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Whitestar led Grassclan's battle patrol single file across the meadow and into the Forest Patch. This time, the clan would be trying a different approach in order to claim more territory. Swiftcloud and the other Spies would hide among the shadows, studying Treeclan's fighting techniques and acting as obstacles for the enemy. Meanwhile, the warriors would do most of the fighting. These tactics could be seen as cheap, but the senior warriors argued that it was no cheaper than Treeclan's overhead ambushes. Swiftcloud had to agree with them there, although for some reason, it still felt wrong to stoop to Treeclan's level. But nobody protested, and so Swiftcloud dared not breathe a word of her worries.
Grassclan's battle patrol came to a halt as they reached the Treeclan

scent markers. Whitestar raised her tail, pointing it in a command to move forward. The Fighters marched on, disappearing further into the woods. Chicorynose hung back a few heartbeats with the Spies, watching the others until they were out of sight. Then, she flicked her torn ear as a silent instruction to scramble and hide. Swiftcloud nodded, diving into a particularly dense patch of thickets to hide her white pelt. Without another glance back, she proceeded onward. Swiftcloud creeped along the forest floor, jaws parted slightly to taste the air. She had to ensure that she wasn't directly crawling towards a Treeclan patrol. This mission was important, she couldn't mess up this time.

Every few bear-lengths, the patched she-cat gave pause to observe her surroundings. For a while, the forest was quiet, echoing only with the call of birds. And then, a yowl split through the air. Following the cry came the caterwaul of many battle hungry warriors, and the thrashing of bushes. Forest and dewy smells clashed, and branches and debris went flying. A fight had been engaged. At the assurance that Treeclan's warriors were distracted, Swiftcloud surged forward, getting as close to the action as possible without blowing her cover. Through the ferns, Swiftcloud observed the moves Treeclan used when fighting with Grassclan.

Many cats seemed to favor techniques that required the use of their weight, or jumping. Treeclan cats were ambush predators after all, it made sense that they always tried to have the high ground. Treeclan also seemed to favor the use of their claws rather than teeth, often dealing scratches and front paw blows. Swiftcloud understood this information to be useful, and couldn't wait to report back to Whitestar once all of this was over.

In her observations, Swiftcloud kept an eye on a specific few clanmates during their fights.

The first cat she watched was Heatherwing. The lilac she-cat put her intelligence to good use during this battle. In heartbeats it seemed the molly could calculate the perfect stradgey she's need to face off specific enemies. For the smaller ones, she used her sharp reflexes to keep up with them and to strike. For the bulkier cats, she utilized Grassclan's speed. Heatherwing was an excellent fighter, a cat the clan could be proud of to represent them. Even pregnancy couldn't hold her down.

Then there was Rabbitstorm, who seemed to quickly pick up on Treeclan's strategies, and was trying to counteract them in the same

way. In this fight, he was up against Fogbreath, a particularly large gray smoke tom. Rabbitstorm stood up on his hind legs, crashing down upon his enemy. And when the other tom rose and tried to do the same, Rabbitstorm dodged the tom with a quickness.
The cat Swiftcloud's attention focused on most was Shadowfang. Shadowfang's fighting style was a perfect blend of all the teachings he'd gained from his time mentored by Tigerfang. Shadowfang hit hard, and struck fierce. He favored biting to clawing, and kept low so it was easier to dodge. Though he left himself open at times, in spots that Swiftcloud, his partner, would usually guard. Swiftcloud longed to fight by his side, to leap out and strike the warriors who tried to get the jump on him. But she couldn't.
Luckily, she wasn't so helpless; she was still able to stick out a paw and trip up any cat who may be passing by. And she could bite the ankles of any enemy that crossed her hiding place. Though she'd rather be out in the open, Swiftcloud had to admit sneaking around and surprising Treeclan cats was fun. It was a thrill unlike any she'd felt since her very first fight with Shadowfang. Grassclan's plan was working. *If we keep this up maybe Grassclan can win!*
But then, something went awry. A Grassclan Spy was snatched up from the undergrowth, thrown into the clearing for every cat to see. Swiftcloud recognized that clanmate as Bumblethroat. The tabby tom crouched against the ground, ears laid back against his head. It was hard to tell whether he was scared or ready to attack.

"They have spies watching us!" Yowled Blazestar. In a heartbeat, Swiftcloud figured out that he was the cat who'd caught Bumblethroat prowling in the undergrowth. "Find the others! Flush them into the open!" He commanded, voice booming. Treeclan grew angier upon discovering that they were being watched. Several warriors began to search through the bushes surrounding them, while the others surged forward to brutalize Grassclan's Fighters. Swiftcloud shrank back in her hiding place, searching for an opening to scramble away. As she stalked along, a small cat slid through the bracken bushes in front of her. Their eyes lit up with excitement as they noticed Swiftcloud crouched to the right of them.

"I found one!" Declared the apprentice, sounding far too overjoyed. Swiftcloud hissed at them, just as she was hoisted from the

undergrowth by the scruff. A powerful warrior picked her up and threw her across the battlegrounds. They snarled at her as she stood to shake out her leaf covered pelt. Swiftcloud crouched into a battle stance, ready to take the defensive against her enemy. But before they could fight, Swiftcloud heard Shadowfang's yowl cut through the air. In an instant she turned, pelting in the direction of the sound. One of Treeclan's senior warriors had the young black tom pinned on his back. Shadowfang's teeth sunk into one of the cat's shoulders, while the cat clawed at Grassclan tom's chest. Swiftcloud ducked her head and charged forward, slamming herself into the warrior's side. The cat fell off of Shadowfang with a loud "*oof*" and was sent running after Swiftcloud gave their muzzle a good couple of swipes.

The mates gave each other a respectful nod before taking up fighting positions, rear to rear. Cats came barreling towards them, pushing them back as they fought. It seemed to be Treeclan's new strategy, as the entire fight moved closer and closer to the Grassclan border. Eventually, they were fighting right on the scent markers. Despite this, the clans were evenly matched. An equal amont of cats remained, and the energy hadn't yet died away. *We still have a chance*, Swiftcloud thought hopefully as she sent an apprentice-the one who'd found her-running away.

Suddenly, a gut wrenching shriek made every cat freeze. That noise, Swiftcloud soon realized with horror, had come from one of Grassclan's ranks. Heatherwing lay on her side by the roots of a sycamore tree, a pool of blood forming around her still body. Every cat turned to look in the molly's direction. Some mewled in shock at the sight, while others bristled and shrank under their own weight. Rabbitstorm rushed to Heatherwing's side, drawing in a sharp gasp as he took in the sight of his mate. His body instantly quaked, mouth opening up into a silent wail. He moved, pressing his forehead against her newly plump belly. No cat need say a word to know what had become of the young warrior.

Still, Snowfrost approached to conduct a confirming exam. As she sat beside Heatherwing, Swiftcloud noticed blood on the medicine cat's paws. She must have gotten them dirty from tending to the injured, is what the patched molly had figured. Snowfrost touched her ear to Heatherwing's muzzle, a paw resting on the young molly's chest. The clan held their breath as their medicine cat checked for signs of life. For a heartbeat, Rabbitstorm lifted his head, looking to

his aunt with slightest bit of hope. But when she pulled away, Snowfrost gave a somber shake of her head.

"Grassclan, fall back!" Whitestar commanded at once, her cats coming to stand at her side, casting sidelong glances in the direction of Heatherwing and Treeclan. All were prepared to depart for home, eager to rest and recuperate. And to mourn Heatherwing. That was, all except for Chicorynose. The brave deputy marched forward, ears flat against her head, eyes dark with anger. She stopped just a whisker length shy of the border, fur fluffed and tail lashing violently.

"Treeclan scum...You *killed* my little sister! She was expecting kits for Starclan's sake! Couldn't you all see that?!" She whipped her head around glaring at the enemy clan. Her lips drew back in a snarl, claws unsheathing to dig into the earth. "Which one of you fox-hearts did this? Huh? Who should we hold responsible for the death of such innocent lives?"

"Chicorynose." Swiftcloud found herself padding forward, placing herself at the deputy's side. The two mollies pressed their flanks together, a sympathetic purr rumbling in the younger's chest. "Come on. We need to get you home. I promise I'll help find who did this. But we need to leave now."
Chicorynose glanced over her shoulder at her old apprentice, a terrible look of displeasure on her muzzle. Swiftcloud whimpered out a quiet "*please*", which eventually prompted the deputy to turn. Her plumed tail continued to lash, revealing the resentment she undoubtedly felt from backing down from this fight.

"This isn't over," Chicorynose warned, finally joining the rest of the clan. With the deputy returned, Swiftcloud padded over to help Rabbitstorm next. The fluffy lynx point tom remained unmoving as she approached, his face buried in Heatherwing's lilac fur. An empathetic pang twisted Swiftcloud's belly as she watched her friend wallow in misery. As much as she'd like to leave him in peace, this was no place to grieve over the loss of a loved one. Apprehensively, Swiftcloud stuck out a paw, lightly prodding it into the tom's side. Rabbitstorm lifted his head slightly to look at her, a few stray tears dripping off his fluffy face.

"I'll help you," she offered quietly. Rabbitstorm gave the slightest nod and rose to his paws. Shakily he grabbed Heatherwing by her scruff, saving room for Swiftcloud to grab the other side. At Whitestar's silent command the clan made the slow march back home, the pair following slowly behind. There were no calls of victory splitting the air this time. Swiftcloud glanced over to see Treeclan silently hold formation before slinking back into their forest home, most likely too stunned by the deputy's outburst. *I don't blame her. If I had lost someone so close to me I don't know what I'd do.*

Back home, Heatherwing's vigil was in good attendance. Rabbitstorm stuck to his deceased mate's side like sap to a pine tree, Quailbelly right beside him. Both cats cried with the same momentum, hurting the exact same way. Each had a different relationship with the dead lilac molly, yet both had felt her love equally. And returned it just the same.
Beside each cat sat a supportive yet distressed loved one. On Rabbitstorm's side was Jaybird. The queen licked her son's ears, no doubt whispering calming words to help him settle down. And on Quailbelly's side was Frostfeather, who had her paws against her mate's flank, kneading her fur soothingly.
On the opposite side of Heatherwing's body, Chicorynose, Whitestar, Cricketsong, and all of the their older kits were there. They pressed against each other in a supportive huddle, taking in the last of their lost kin before she would be gone forever.

Swiftcloud watched on from the sidelines, not sure how to feel about Heatherwing's death. She was upset for sure, but another emotion seemed to mingle with it. Anger? Perhaps even wonder? Swiftcloud desperately wanted to find out who was responsible for Heatherwing's death. It seemed so unlikely that Treeclan-or any clan really-would kill an expecting cat. Surely it wasn't planned. Would Treeclan want to harm a soon to be mother in revenge for the attack on Brightsky earlier in Leaf-fall? If they did, their plot surely wouldn't involve murder. Swiftcloud did not know Brightsky personally, but she knew the Den Mother would not want a pregnant cat's blood spilled on her account. Then, would that mean the death of Heatherwing was a personal attack? Maybe a Treeclan cat wanted revenge for what happened to Brightsky and took things

too far.
Or...could it be possible that Heatherwing was killed by the same cat responsible for the poisoning of Ambereye, Butterflytail, and Waspwing? There wasn't any evidence of this. But there was a slight possibility. Maybe the cat became dissatisfied with the passive form of murder. Maybe they developed a blood lust, or wanted a quicker way to kill off Grassclan's warriors. Right now this was just a crazy theory. Swiftcloud would have to investigate and search for clues in order to find out more. But for now, all she could do was sit by helplessly and watch the clan mourn another loss of their ranks.
Justice will be served. I will find who is responsible for all the wrongful deaths.

Chapter 37

A half moon had passed since the last battle for the Forest Patch. Treeclan made no attempt to trespass or take back the land Grassclan had claimed; and Grassclan kept to their own boundries, opting to take this time to heal and train. There were multiple cats who itched to get back out there and strike their enemy once more, but Whitestar demanded patience.

"We have been given a great opportunity," she proclaimed during a strategy meeting, "because of this peace, our clan is growing strong again."

"Some peace. Feels more like a stalemate. What if Treeclan is planning something?" Snailear fretted.

"Then we'll be ready for them," responded Chicorynose, eyes darkening. Every cat knew Chicorynose was the biggest advocate for getting the clan back on the battlefield. She wanted revenge on Treeclan for their almost-victory in the last fight. And for the death of her little sister Heatherwing.

Swiftcloud twitched her whiskers, building up the courage to speak up. "Do you think something could be wrong within Treeclan?" She wondered, earning looks from her superiors. "I remember when I'd fought Thornberry in the last few battles, he didn't...seem to be giving it his all. His blows didn't hit as hard as usual. And..and he smelled kinda strange..." Swiftcloud trailed off, shrinking a little in her fur. A few of the clan's senior warriors whispered among themselves while Whitestar swished her tail thoughtfully.

"I think Swiftcloud may be onto something," meowed Sheeptail. "A cat or two I'd fought in the last battle seemed a little dull behind the eyes, and shaggy in the scruff. Even some of the young ones. It felt too easy, even though it ended in a stalemate."

"And Treeclan doesn't seem to be checking their border as frequently as of late," Tigerfang chimed in. "I've been on the last

two border patrols and haven't caught fresh Treeclan scent either time."

"Hmm, that is concerning. Perhaps we should investigate what is going on with our neighbors," Whitestar proposed, raising her chin a little.

"Should we send spies across the border?" Chicorynose suggested, licking her shoulder fur.

"No," Whitestar countered, rising to her paws. "We shall send a patrol to their camp."

"That's mouse-brained!" Slugsnout hissed. "Our cats will be shredded if we send them into the heart of Treeclan territory. We're better off catching a patrol to interrogate or something."

"We will be visiting in peace. Treeclan will have no right to attack. And to ensure this, I will lead the patrol myself. I will also be bringing Snowfrost and a few non-fighting warriors along so the clan will not feel threatened."

"Snowfrost?" Chicorynose parroted the medicine cat's name in a tone which sounded like she'd bitten a bad piece of fresh-kill. "Why would you allow her to come with you to Treeclan?"

"She knows the territory better than any of us. And should there be no patrols at that time, we'll be needing a guide. I know Snowfost will be able to lead us safely through the forest and to Treeclan camp," Whitestar answered surely. The senior warriors exchanged wary glances.

"I still think it's a mouse-brained idea," Slugsnout muttered under his breath, but still loud enough for Grassclan's leader to catch.

"Which is why I won't be bringing you," Whitestar hissed, shocking the white and ginger patched warrior with her perceptiveness. "Swiftcloud. You will accompany me to Treeclan. You've been there before, I'm sure you'll recognize the area. And I think I'd like Rosebloom to come with as well. Can you send her to my den please? And Snowfrost too."

"Um, yes Whitestar," Swiftcloud agreed with a blink.

"Very good, thank you. Meeting dismissed."

One by one, the senior warriors trailed out of the den. Swiftcloud followed closely behind, padding away from the group across the clearing to search for the cats Whitestar requested for a patrol.

The first place Swiftcloud decided to check was the warrior's den. Perhaps the cats she needed to find were taking shelter in the warmth of the large boulder. It was a cold day after all, with dark clouds looming in the sky above. It might even rain.

Swiftcloud slipped into the crack of the den, blinking to allow her eyes to adjust to the darkness inside. When her vision cleared, she was able to make out the shape of one of her soon-to-be companions. Rosebloom was laying in her nest at the back of the den, an empty patch of wool beside her which lay untouched. The former queen had taken to building a second nest beside her own ever since she'd returned to warrior duties. Swiftcloud always wondered if Rosebloom saved the space for her deceased mate, Ryestep, but never had the courage to ask. In fact, since she became a warrior again, Swiftcloud hadn't spoken to the she-cat much at all.

"Rosebloom. Can I bother you for a moment?" She piped softly, trying not to disturb the other molly too much.

Rosebloom's eyes fluttered open, dilated with sleepiness as she focused on Swiftcloud across the den.

"Hm..? Oh yes, of course. What can I do for you, Swiftcloud?"

"It's for Whitestar, actually. She'd like an audience with you in her den."

"Really?" Rosebloom yawned, stretching all four of her legs out. Her face twisted for a heartbeat then relaxed just as her muscles did. The former queen stood to give her pelt a shake, then sat back down to groom. "In that case, I'll be sure to meet with her shortly."

"Thank you." Swiftcloud dipped her head respectfully to the older she-cat before turning, allowing Rosebloom some privacy to clean

up.

Out in the open, Swiftcloud searched for her next target. As she scanned the clearing she parted her jaws, tasting the air for the familiar scent of Grassclan's senior medicine cat. When she'd caught hold of it she was off, following the trail to the medicine den.

Here she found Snowfrost, sitting alone at the back, covered by the shade. By her right was a pile of lavender, perhaps the last for the season. To her left, more generic flowers and leaves. The lynx point molly was concentrating on sorting a particular set of herbs. Her mouth moved as she recited the use of each plant, piling them on top of each other in a neat row of four. Perhaps they were meant for the elders. When she'd finished with those, Snowfrost gently swept them aside with her tail, then pulled another pile of herbs in front of her with a paw. Swiftcloud hated to interrupt the medicine cat while she was busy with her work, but Whitestar needed to speak with her. Quietly, she padded deeper into the den, seating herself a tail-length away from the medicine cat to patiently wait for her attention.

"Swiftcloud," Snowfrost meowed with a glance, but otherwise not taking her focus off her herbs, "did you come to have that shoulder of yours examined? I'm assuming the cold has been causing it to ache some, judging by the way you're favoring that side."

Swiftcloud felt herself flush beneath her pelt self consciously. She hadn't even registered the ache in her shoulder until it was pointed out. *Snowfrost's a really good medicine cat if she can tell that while hardly even looking at me.* "I..I guess it's a little tender. But I'll be alright. That's not what I came here for, though. Whitestar would like to speak with you in her den, when you have a free moment."

"A meeting, hm? I wonder what she could want from me." Snowfrost's ears twitched as she poked her claw into a bundle of leaves below her paw, her eyes narrowed. Whether it be from annoyance or concentration, Swiftcloud was uncertain.

"It's nothing bad, I promise," the patched molly found herself needing to assure. Snowfrost blinked and glanced up at Swiftcloud again, her tail-tip twitching. With a sigh, she rose to her paws. After

putting her supplies away, she headed to the den's exit, and disappeared past the ivy tendrils. Swiftcloud held herself back a heartbeat before following. She carefully picked her way through the clearing and over to Tall Stone, watching the tip of Snowfrost's tail disappear into the stone's crack. The white and black patched warrior seated herself outside. She waited patiently for the other mollies to emerge, standing once Rosebloom came into sight. Snowfrost came out after her, padding back to her den with Whitestar watching her as she went.

"Snowfrost's putting together some traveling herbs for us. Once she's done so, we may leave," she informed the others. Within moments, Snowfrost had returned, three bundles of leaves in her mouth. Swiftcloud resisted the urge to grimace as one was placed at her paws. She remembered how vile these herbs tasted, and was not looking forward to eating them again. But Rosebloom and Whitestar didn't seem to have a problem with them. So, Swiftcloud buried her disgust and quickly gulped down the nasty concoction. Once they'd all had a dose of their medicine, Whitestar flicked her tail prompting her patrol forward. Chicorynose called out well wishes behind them, just as the last of the mollies slipped through the bramble tunnel.

While traveling across the meadow, the patrol's pace was swift. Whitestar wanted to reach the Forest Patch by sunhigh, so that they'd hopefully make it back to familiar ground before the sun would set. As luck would have it, the patrol was right on time. As they drew closer to the Treeclan border, Whitestar began to slow down.

"Snowfrost, why don't you lead us the rest of the way?" She suggested, looking back towards the medicine cat. Rosebloom's eyes narrowed as the healer brushed past her to stand beside their leader.

"I haven't been that far into the forest in ages," Snowfrost warned. "How are you so sure that I will lead us in the right direction?"

"I have faith that you will," Whitestar answered simply. Rosebloom let out a snort, prompting Snowfrost to lash her tail.

"Faith? In me? My, I haven't heard that in quite a while." There was resentment in the healer's tone and Swiftcloud couldn't understand why. Didn't all warriors put faith in their medicine cats? Sure, Snowfrost was unpopular, but that was no reason to not have faith in her.

"Just do as you're told," Rosebloom growled, "don't make this into a big deal. We don't have any time for that."

"Rosebloom's right, I'm afraid. Come now, let's get moving shall we?"

Snowfrost simply grunted and lifted her chin. She moved to the head of the patrol, keeping a few paces in front of Whitestar. She led the patrol onward through the Forest Patch, ducking under low hanging branches, and leaping over tree roots. The four she-cats twisted and turned through the brush cautiously, following the medicine cat's lead, up a small incline and into an area where the trees began to thin. Swiftcloud recognized this place, moreso by scent than by the scenery surrounding them. A few more fox-lengths ahead, the Thunder Path came into view. A monster had recently stormed by-judging by the smoke still lingering in the area. The four mollies huddled together, pressing themselves side by side as they looked out at the black stone path in front of them. It was dangerous going across, Swiftcloud remembered, and so the patrol would have to be very careful.
For safety they checked in each direction. First left, then right. In the other direction the rumble of an approaching monster gave the patrol enough warning to jump to safely. Once it sputtered passed, the mollies cleared their lungs of its fumes and dashed across the stone. They skidded to a halt safely on the other side, resting in the undergrowth. Here, in the deeper part of the forest, bird song echoed through the trees. Squirrels could be seen scurrying across bare branches, chasing each other around tree trunks in an attempt to steal food away from their rivals.
The forest was a much livelier place than any Swiftcloud had seen before. It was serene. For a brief heartbeat she thought back to the time she'd left her kittypet home, eager to explore the wild beyond her garden and neighborhood. What would her life have been like if she had chosen to visit the forest instead of the meadow? Would she

be a Treeclan warrior now? Would it be possible for her to be as happy in the forest as she was in the open fields?
Swiftcloud gave her pelt a quick shake, ridding herself of such hypothetical questions and thoughts. She had no doubts in her mind about the place she'd chosen to call home. Despite all the trouble going on, she was happy. That's all that mattered. A warm feeling filled Swiftcloud's heart as she glanced at each of the mollies on her patrol. Snowfrost was padding a fox-length ahead of the rest. Her muzzle was raised so she could see exactly where she was going. Every now and then she'd pause to sniff at a particular plant or tree before pressing onwards again. Despite her earlier griping, she seemed to know exactly where she was going.

Next in line was Whitestar, who carefully watched every move the medicine cat made. Every now and then she would check on Rosebloom and Swiftcloud, but otherwise her focus remained forward. Like usual, her overall demeanor was as calm as water. But the leader's eyes showed trouble. She must have been wondering what the patrol would find once they'd reach Treeclan. She could even be worried about the sort of greeting they'd receive showing up unannounced. Whatever might be going through Whitestar's mind, it remained unclear.

Rosebloom seemed the most wary of their surroundings the deeper they traveled into the woods. She bristled at every unfamiliar sound, probably expecting an ambush from an awaiting Treeclan patrol. Her fears were justified; the clans were still at war after all. The mission they were carrying out was dangerous. But the patrol was peaceful, so Treeclan had no reason to attack. Still, Swiftcloud figured Rosebloom probably couldn't consider things in the same way. Especially since she'd lost her mate to Treeclan unjustly.

The forest floor began to dip beneath the patrol's paws as they reached the heart of the forest. The winds revealed fresh cat scent the further they headed in the same direction. Treeclan couldn't be too far off now. Three bear-lengths ahead, Swiftcloud spotted a wall of shrubs in their path. As they drew closer to it, the easier it was to make out the blackthorn bushes which lined the outer perimeter of Treeclan's camp. They had made it! Although the joy of the Grassclan cats' arrival was short lived.

Swiftcloud fought the urge to shrink back in fear and disgust as the patrol at last settled outside their enemy's home base. A smell unlike any other hung over the clearing like a poisonous fog. It was murky and bitter, similar to the stench of bile. It was repugnant. The Grassclan patrol exchanged troubled looks among themselves, silently questioning their choice to visit. But they knew there was no turning back now. They had to figure out what was wrong with Treeclan, if only now to prepare themselves for whatever may come.

Whitestar led the way to the entrance of the camp. She crouched momentarily, springing into the low hanging branches of the Entrance Tree. She waited for the rest of her patrol to follow before jumping down into the heart of Treeclan's land below.

The camp appeared very different in the cooler seasons of the year. An unnatural silence hung in the air, devoid of birdsong and chatter. The trees which surrounded the clearing were practically bare now, exposing dull light onto the leaf littered floor below. The sun peeked through the clouds momentarily, revealing illness within the sunken eyes of warriors laying around camp. Swiftcloud felt uneasy.
Cats lazed around by where she assumed the medicine den was, coughs rattling in their chests. The clan's unusually few apprentices worked hard on the elder's den, taking expert care of a lone silver and black tabby she-cat. Pitiful shrill mewls erupted from the nursery from kits begging for relief. And worst of all, hardly any cat paid attention to the visitors who had invaded their home. It was as if the entire clan was in a sickness related trance.

"Whitestar," a cat meowed, voice steady but firm. Wolfheart approached the Grassclan patrol from across the clearing, dipping his head to the leader with the deepest of respect. Swiftcloud noted that Wolfheart appeared healthy in comparison to a lot of his clanmates, although he did look a bit thin. It was good to see at least one warrior unphased by whatever ailed everyone else around them. "You must be Starclan sent to have come all this way. Follow me; Blazestar will want to speak with you."

Rosebloom and Swiftcloud exchanged a glance but said nothing, following Whitestar as she was led to the Great Stump by

Wolfheart. Snowfrost walked just a few pawsteps faster than her clanmates, trying to match pace with the tom. She cleared her throat, obviously trying to gain his attention. But Wolfheart ignored her entirely. Snowfrost's ears soon lowered, betrayal crossing her features. Rosebloom growled as she watched the medicine cat, while Whitestar fixed her with a glare. The mollies' display was so unusual to Swiftcloud. Neither Rosebloom nor Whitestar were the types to get annoyed. Why were they now acting so hostile? It must have been because they were in Treeclan's camp, Swiftcloud reasoned with herself. Maybe they were upset that Snowfrost was trying to be friendly.
Blazestar emerged from beneath the Great Stump as he scented the enemy patrol approach. Whitestar flicked an ear, stopping her patrol a tail-length away from the Treeclan members. Alone she stepped forward to speak with her fellow leader.

"Well isn't this a surprise." Blazestar looked at each Grassclan warrior in turn. His head was lifted high with authority. For once, no hostility shone in his expression. "Welcome. What brings you four here today?"

Whitestar dipped her head respectfully. "Grassclan has not scented one of your patrols in quite some time, Blazestar. We were wondering what had become of Treeclan since our last battle."

"Some cats thought you had left your forest entirely," Snowfrost muttered, sarcasm apparent.

Blazestar narrowed his eyes at the medicine cat, not the slightest bit amused. "You would've liked that, wouldn't you? Considering the reputation you have within my clan."

The fur along Snowfrost's spine rose instantly. She flexed her claws in and out again, as if she were trying to hold herself back from cuffing the Treeclan leader's ears.

"We are not here to discuss past grievances," Whitestar broke in before an argument could ensue. "We simply came looking for answers."

Slowly, Blazestar forced himself to relax. He huffed, licking down

his ruffled chest fur. "Well, you've found them. There isn't any use in trying to hide the obvious, when the sickness in my clan is so apparent."

Swiftcloud had to admire the bravery it must have taken for Blazestar to admit his clan's weakness. Leafbare had hardly begun to dawn upon the Land's Star. And yet Treeclan had fallen victim to greencough. Things must have been terribly rough for them.

"We've lost many brave cats already. Most of our elders have perished. And even my long time deputy hunts in Silverpelt's domain."

"Thornberry has passed?" Rosebloom asked quietly. Blazestar gave a sad but confirming nod.

"Wolfheart is doing a fine job as replacement. Although he still has much to learn, and has very big paw prints to fill. Still, we are all getting on as best as we can in these challenging times of the year. Mothsong is dividing up what's left of our catmint to ensure all of our sick get at least a small dosage."

"Low supplies, hm?" Snowfrost queried. Blazestar looked to the medicine cat with intrigue. He seemed almost eager to hear what else she might have to say. "Well there's a simple solution to that. I can provide your medicine cat with the herbs she needs."

Rosebloom bristled at the offer, with Swiftcloud looking to the medicine cat for an explanation. Did she really have the authority to offer such assistance? Swiftcloud's attention turned towards Whitestar to see what she would say.

The siamese she-cat seemed to be lost in thought for a heartbeat. When she finally spoke again, her tone was hard with seriousness. "I will allow our medicine cats to share catmint with your clan, seeing how much of a hold this illness has on you. But, we will only share only under one condition."

"Oh?" Blazestar prompted. "And what might that be?"

"The war between us must be postponed," Whitestar began. "You

see, I believe this could be a benefit for both of our clans. Grassclan will have time to heal from the wounds yours has left, while Treeclan can recuperate from it's greencough. I propose we call a two or three moons long truce. I think that should be ample time for us all to become fit enough to fight again."

Blazestar seemed bewildered by the prospect that his enemy would grant him such a luxury. Time to heal? In war? The idea must seem absurd. But it was obvious that Blazestar was desperate. Everyone knew how dedicated he was to keeping Treeclan well and strong. By this point, he would probably agree to most stipulations.

"We will gladly accept your offer, and your proposal," Blazestar finally meowed with a head dip. "The war between Treeclan and Grassclan shall be settled when the worst of Leafbare is over."

"When the worst of Leafbare is over," Whitestar echoed in agreement, sitting down. She dipped her head to the other leader once more then sat erect to address the four cats around them

"Wolfheart, Rosebloom, Swiftcloud, Snowfrost. You are the witnesses of this agreement. As such it is now your responsibility to help us maintain peace for the next season. You are the proof that this meeting took place. Be sure to keep hold of our agreement."

The three warriors and medicine cat nodded, moving to flank their respective leaders.

"I shall bring the catmint to the border tomorrow at sunhigh," Snowfrost informed Blazestar. "It is crucial that you let Mothsong and Berryfrost know immediately. I will not sit around for long, should they decide to take their time meeting with me."

Blazestar swayed his tail, turning to Wolfheart. "You heard her. Go and make sure my sister and her apprentice are aware of the plan. I'd like to know what Mothsong says when she finds out about the herbs." There was a softness in the ginger tom's tone, and an excited gleam in his eye. It was hard for Swiftcloud to tell if Blazestar was excited about the temporary truce, or if he was anticipating how happy Mothsong would be.

Whitestar rose to her paws and flicked her ears twice, summoning her patrol to fall in step behind her.

"We'll be taking our leave now, Blazestar. I'll be waiting to hear an update from your clan come half-moon. May the winds be with you."

"And may Starclan light your path," Blazestar answered in return. "I'll have Moonface and Tigerlily escort you four back to the border."

The Grassclan patrol gathered by the Entrance Tree awaiting their escorts arrival. Moonface and Tigerlily padded up to them a few heartbeats later, flanking either side of the patrol. The warriors acted as guides as they all made their way back through the forest, and swiftly across the Thunder Path. Swiftcloud fell in step beside her friend Moonface and spoke with her as they travelled. Through her, Swiftcloud was able to learn that Magpietail had had her kittens; the clan none the wiser of their half-clan heritage. She also learned of the molly's recent pairing with her longtime friend Sunflower. It felt nice to catch up with the lives of her Treeclan friends, outside of a gathering. For a little while, things felt as though they were normal again. And perhaps, if they were lucky, this truce would lead to a more long lasting peace.
Grassclan's patrol finally pulled ahead once the scent of their borders became noticeable. Their Treeclan escorts watched as they went, and promptly bid them farewell once they'd crossed back into their own territory. Whitestar in return expressed her gratitude before at last leading her patrol back towards their camp, the light of the settings sun guiding their path onward.

Chapter 38

A bitter chill blew through the warrior's den, giving Swiftcloud a harsh awakening. The white and black patched molly shivered, rising from her usually shared nest to look around. It had to be mid day by now, seeing as most of the other warriors had left, Shadowfang included. But the sight at the den's entrance seemed to show otherwise. The world beyond the den's threshold appeared bleak and pale. Seeing outside was impossible. What was going on? Only a quarter moon had passed since Swiftcloud accompanied a patrol of her clanmates to Treeclan's camp. Yet in that time, so much had changed. The wind blew colder now, the meadow dimming, plants dormant for the upcoming season. Birds had begun migrating in flocks away from the Land's Star to seek warmer weather. Treeclan was still receiving aid from Snowfrost, a fresh delivery of herbs traded off every other day. Life went on, adapting with the environment. But there was something ominous on the horizon. Though no one elsed seemed to sense it but Swiftcloud. The patched she-cat fluffed her pelt against the cold, stretching out stiff limbs before leaving her nest. She blinked, clearing her mind from the fog of sleep and anxious thoughts. Frost was accumulating on the earth just by the rock's mouth, thickening as the warrior drew closer to the den's exit. When she finally poked her head outside, Swiftcloud realized why the world seemed so muted. The patched molly tilted her nose towards the sky, blue eyes widening at the sight. Soft white flakes cascaded down from the clouds, sticking to fur and the ground below. They were thick, falling faster after every moment. On the grass they seemed to glisten like stars.

"It's...snowing?" Swiftcloud ask herself quietly, looking at the camp in awe. When she was younger, she had only ever seen snow fall from the safety of her Twoleg's den. Only once had she actually felt the frozen white material, long after it had landed. It was a small pile, nearly melted away, but she'd been lucky enough to be outside to play in it. Then, Swiftcloud had enjoyed the feel of it on her pelt. But now the snow brought her a sense of dread. Before she'd had the comfort of her Twoleg's den to return to to warm her paws and

recover from the cold. Now there was nowhere like that to go. But Swiftcloud could handle it, she knew she'd adapt. She was a warrior after all, warriors could do anything.

"Woah!" The squeal came from across camp, from a small brown and white cat. Tulippaw stood a tail-length in front of the apprentice's den, a look of wonder gracing her features. Swiftcloud let out a purr of amusement, prancing over to her. "What is this stuff?"

"It's snow," Swiftcloud replied. A large snowflake landed on Tulippaw's nose making her sneeze.

"Brr. It's cold!"

"It's suppose to be." Swiftcloud suppressed a mrrow of laughter, her nubby black tail wiggling in amusement. Tulippaw bounced in place, spinning around to chase her tail.

"What are you doing?" Swiftcloud's composure was lost as she couldn't help but giggle at the sight.

"Trying to look at the snow that's landing on me! I want to see what it looks like up close," Tulippaw responded as she caught her tail at last. She drew her nose close to her to it, sniffing at the flakes. But her breathe made them melt away faster than she could observe them. Tulippaw let out a noise of disappointment, shoulders sagging slightly.

"Why don't you ask another cat to let you see how the snowflakes looks on their fur instead? You might have a better chance of seeing the forms they take," Swiftcloud suggested. Immediately Tulippaw perked up.

"Ooh good idea! I'll catch up with you in a little while then, if thats alright. I hope later on we can go out and get some battle practice in. I want to know how to foght in weather like this," Tulippaw mewed.

"Sounds like a plan to me," Swiftcloud agreed. She watched her apprentice give another bounce before bounding off to find another

cat to speak with. Swiftcloud began to glance around camp once more. Her vision eventually rested on the fresh-kill pile just a short distance away. Mistyleaf was there, picking her way through, probably trying to find something specific to eat. After a pause in her digging, the fur along the silver she-cat's spine rose. Her eyes grew as wide as a full moon, and an audible gasp passed her lips. Swiftcloud tilted her head in wonder as she continued to observe the other molly.

"Goldensong!" Mistyleaf cried, turning and racing towards the medicine den. Goldensong was already on her way to meet her apprentice, summoned by her startled call.
"The-the fresh-kill pile! Please, you need to come see!" The two of them padded back over. Swiftcloud couldn't contain her curiosity any longer and stood up, padding over to check out what was happening. At the bottom of the pile lay a couple of mice; beneath them a sizeable puddle of blood had formed.

"Looks like some cat left too deep a cut on one or two of them," Swiftcloud commented, twitching her whiskers. Mistyleaf was still bristling, and Goldensong shook her head.

"No," murmured the medicine cat, "there aren't any. Look." Goldensong took her paw, rolling over each piece of prey to examine it. There was hardly a mark on any of them, only a couple tiny holes on the neck where the killing blow was delt.

"It's an omen," Mistyleaf whispered.

Swiftcloud gulped nervously. "What..what does it mean?"

"Death is coming to the clan," Goldensong answered bluntly, voice hushed so only the three of them could hear. She tilted her head back to look at the sky, furrowing her brow in worried contemplation. Across the way suddenly a cat began to cough. All three mollies turned their heads in the sound's direction. Rosebloom sat crouched beside the warrior's den, head bent and sides shuttering as a wheeze shook through her.

"Oh Starclan." Mistyleaf's voice was hardly audible. "Not greencough."

"Greencough..?" Swiftcloud echoed, heart lurching with fear.

"Don't leap off of tall cliffs," Goldensong chided quietly. "We don't know if that is what Rosebloom has. For all we know, she could have had a tickle in her throat. But that isn't to say I won't examine her. Come, Mistyleaf. Let's get her to our den." Mistyleaf waited a few moments more while her mentor met with Rosebloom.

"She's lying," Mistyleaf whimpered. "Fully named medicine cats can sense developing illness. She can see it as clearly as I can. It's greencough...." The molly's voice sounded defeated, her inflections giving away notes of fear. This only served to make Swiftcloud more uneasy.

"Mistyleaf!" Goldensong called from outside the medicine den. Swiftcloud shot her friend a sympathetic look, urging her to be on her way. She watched as the silver she-cat met with her mentor, head dipped and ears lowered. Swiftcloud watched Goldensong flick her tail, perking herself up. Mistyleaf copied, though Swiftcloud suspected it was due to instruction. Seemingly happier, the medicine cats disappeared into their den to examine Rosebloom.

"Hey, Swiftcloud!" Swiftcloud nearly jumped out of her fur at the call. She whipped around, looking at the lithe molly behind her. Quailbelly had approached, Tulippaw and Thistlepaw flanking her. The light brown tabby purred softly in amusement, tilting her head with a polite smile. "I apologize, I didn't mean to give you a scare. Thistlepaw and I are going on a border patrol. I'd like to take Tulippaw along with us, if that's alright. With any luck, we'll be home before the worst of this storm begins."

"Patrol..?" Swiftcloud repeated, still feeling a little spaced out. Giving her pelt quick shake managed to break her out of her worried trance. At least enough so she could think properly again. "Oh, right, A patrol! That sounds nice. Mind if I join you as well?"

"Not at all. The more the merrier," Quailbelly invited cheerfully.

"Yay! Then let's go!!" Tulippaw cheered, running to Quailbelly's other side to press herself into Thistlepaw.

"Hey you four, be careful out there!" Chicorynose called after them from across camp. "Make sure you bring some fresh kill home with you. But don't stay out too late or you'll catch a chill!"

"Ok, mom!" Swiftcloud meowed back jokingly. As she turned to leave the camp, Snowfrost came in through the bramble tunnel. Frostfeather and Pansypaw were behind her, heads high, accomplishment in their eyes. The three she-cats must have just returned from delivering another round of catmint to Treeclan's medicine cats. It felt good knowing that task had been taken care of already, for today at least. It was one less thing for Swiftcloud to worry about.

Shaking out her brown pelt-now lightly dusted with snow-Tulippaw impatiently darted through the bramble tunnel and out into the meadow, Thistlepaw at her heels. Swiftcloud ducked outside last, allowing Quailbelly in front of her.

The meadow was a sight to behold at this moment. The hills were peppered white and brown, the snow falling more freely out here than in camp. Crisp white flakes danced gracefully on the wind, swirling around the patrol as they made their way across the territory. The breeze whistled in Swiftcloud's ears, sounding like the whispers of warriors passed; cats who had walked this very path a long time ago. Perhaps it was because the patrol was approaching Mountainclan. The Moon Cavern was there. It was possible that Starclan tredded this path in death, just as they did in life. It was a comforting thought. It made Swiftcloud feel safe.

The chill of Leafbare made the patrol more alert of their surroundings, more eager to move around to keep warm. The four mollies soon made it to the Mountainclan border. They headed northward, reinforcing the scent markers every few bearlengths. As they traveled along, the scent of an oncoming patrol could be caught on the wind.

"Let's wait and meet them," Quailbelly suggested. "It'll be nice to see how Mountainclan's getting along in this weather."

"And it'll be nice to talk to a clan that doesn't want to rip our whiskers off," Thistlepaw commented. Quailbelly fixed her apprentice with a glance, while Swiftcloud busied herself with cleaning Tulippaw's ears to pass the time.

"Swiftcloud, Quailbelly, hello there!" Pinepelt called as she came up to the scent lines, her clanmates not far behind. She touched noses with Swiftcloud, giving a friendly nod to Quailbelly. The other cats on Pinepelt's patrol tipped their heads in greetings.

"How is Mountainclan fairing?" Quailbelly asked, stiped tail high.

"We're wonderful, thank you for asking. Breezeheart had her kits today. They're so beautiful. The clan's fixing to have a feast to celebrate!"

"And Ravencall's litter was named a few days ago. We'll leave that to Fogstar to announce at the gathering," a brown and black tortoishell warrior named Alderwing joined in.

"Sounds like a lot of excitement's gone on this moon." Swiftcloud purred with amusement. She'd always found it sweet how Mountainclan cherished their young.

"Oh speaking of excitement, I'd like to introduce you to my new apprentice." Pinepelt swept her tail around a younger cat's shoulders, ushering them forward. "This is Lichenpaw."

"H..hi," the gray she-cat murmured shyly. Her deep green eyes were round, stuck on Swiftcloud. "You're the most beautiful she-cat I've ever seen," Lichenpaw confessed to the warrior, ducking her head. Swiftcloud's ears perked, her pelt lit ablaze with heat. She felt flustered. Pinepelt purred in amusement, licking her apprentice's cheek.

"She's such a little romantic," the tabby teased. Lichenpaw shrank that much more in place. Thistlepaw and Tulippaw stepped forward to greet the new apprentice. They chatted idly among themselves, expressing the joy they felt to be in training at last.

"Anyways," the final cat on the patrol, Slatestep, meowed, "How is Grassclan this moon?"
Swiftcloud and Quailbelly exchanged a glance.

"We're doing good," Swiftcloud decided to answer simply.

"Our kits grow stronger every day. Whitestar's will be apprenticed

soon, I think. And everyone is healthy," Quailbelly added, so as not to be suspicious. Mountainclan and Grassclan were friendly with one another. It was only polite to speak of news when patrols met. Though Quailbelly was careful not to reveal any issues the clan was facing. It wasn't Mountainclan's place to know. Besides, Whitestar should decide what information would be appropriate to share with outsiders.

"That's good to hear," Alderwing mewed.

"Well, we'd better be heading home now," Swiftcloud decided noticing the snow falling faster every moment.

Pinepelt nodded her head agreeingly. "Until next time, then, Grassclan. May the stones guide your paws."

"And may Starclan light your path!" The apprentices chimed in unison. At once the patrols parted ways, heading deep into their own respective territories.
As they walked, Swiftcloud reflected on the meeting they had just had. Dread churned in her stomach like a storm. She'd never thought about how many secrets Grassclan kept until now. Swiftcloud wanted to tell her Mountainclan friend all about the battles she'd fought and the drama ensuing with Treeclan. Yet she was forbidden from telling Pinepelt anything. If cats from outside the clan were to know how weak Grassclan was due to the war, they'd surely take advantage. And the threat of an oncoming outbreak of greencough didn't help matters.
The knot in Swiftcloud's belly twisted tighter. What would the clan do if Rosenbloom truly was ill? Would they be able to contain it better than Treeclan had? Or was Grassclan destined to face the same fate?

Chapter 39

Swiftcloud awoke early the next day, emerging from the shelter of the warrior's den into the crisp morning air. The clearing was shrouded in darkness. The sky above was nothing more than a depressing gray slate. Snow still fell upon the meadow, turning everything powdery white. Even the ground underpaw was covered. Swiftcloud shivered as a chill started to seep into her pawpads. She skipped over towards the shadow of the Tall Stone, where less snow had settled. Even here the ground was as cold as stone, but it was better than standing ankles deep in the white substance.
Other warriors stood within this small clearing. Chicorynose sat above the rest, atop Tall Stone's peak. It appeared she was ready to send out the dawn patrol.

"This morning we will be prioritizing our border patrols over hunting," the deputy began, "it'll be harder to catch anything while the sun's barely risen, especially with this snow. For now, let's ensure all of our scent markers have been freshened up. Shadowfang, lead a patrol to the Twolegplace border. Cloverpetal, you'll take a patrol to the Forest Patch. And Cowpatch will lead one to Mountainclan. You three may choose whoever you want to join you."

Instantly Shadowfang turned to acknowledge his mate. "You already know I'm having you join me," he remarked to Swiftcloud.

"You'd better," Swiftcloud warned teasingly, "someone has to be around to make sure you don't go fighting any more kittypets."

"That was *one time!* I was young. Besides, how was I supposed to know that kittypet would one day become the love of my life?"

Swiftcloud let out a flustered *mrrow* of laughter, batting at Shadowfang's whiskers playfully. "So who else are you going to take on your patrol?"

"How about Bumblethroat and Sheeptail?" Shadowfang suggested

"Good idea," Swiftcloud agreed, turning. "Let's go find them."

"No need, I've already found you." Bumblethroat came padding over to the mates, tail held high in greetings. "I was just about to ask if I could join you two. I need a good jog. My chest's feeling kind of heavy today and I'm hoping the morning air will do me some good."

"Why don't you see a medicine cat about that?" Swiftcloud prompted, lifting a paw to lick warm.

"I'm sure I'll be alright. It's nothing to bother Goldensong and Mistyleaf over. How about I grab Sheeptail for you, and we'll meet you two over by the brambles?"

"Sounds good," Shadowfang agreed to the plan. "We'll be waiting. Try not to take too long."

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The sun slowly creeped overhead as the patrol made their way across the snowy meadow. The land was still dark, the fields hard to navigate behind it's flurry curtain. But the four warriors had been this way dozens of times; by now they didn't need their sight to know where they were headed. When they'd arrived, three out of the patrol wasted no time remarking the border. One cat, however, was straggling behind.
Bumblethroat came hobbling over to the others, wheezing. His breathing came out more as a ragged pant as he settled beside his clanmates. Despite concerned looks, the tom insisted that he was fine. Shadowfang and Sheeptail chose to believe him, but Swiftcloud was skeptical.

Later, as the patrol made their way along the edge of their territory, Bumblethroat began to cough. The cough didn't appear to be a mere tickle in his throat, nor was it a one off instance throughout the rest of the mission. It became more of an upsetting, reoccurring nuisance. By the time the dawn patrol was concluded, the tabby looked as though he'd run across the whole meadow and back.

"Bumblethroat, you really should go see Goldensong," Swiftcloud insisted as they entered the camp. Bumblethroat whimpered a little,

then nodded his head in defeat. The white and black patched molly watched as her clanmate made his way over to the medicine den. She stared onward for an extra couple of heartbeats to make sure the tom would keep his word. Satisfied, shr turned her attention elsewhere for the remainder of the day.

Two days passed. Many of clan awoke to the sound Sheeptail wheezing. Swiftcloud sat up in her nest to study the white tom, still a groggy from sleep. Sheeptail's head was bent and back arched, jaws parted in a pant as he tried to catch his breath. Around them, despite how late into the night it was, every cat was on edge. Swiftcloud's denmates slowly crawled away from Sheeptail, like he would lash out and kill them at any moment. Swiftcloud didn't understand why they were all making such a fuss. She stood, padding towards Sheeptail to check on him. Certainly no one else would.

"Swiftcloud!" A pair of jaws clamped around her scruff. The patched molly turned to look into the worried eyes of her mate who began to drag her back with all the might he could muster. Swiftcloud promptly pulled herself from Shadowfang's grasp, turning to face him, awaiting an explanation.

"Don't go near him. I don't want you getting sick, too," Shadowfang mewled.

"He's not sick," Swiftcloud insisted, though she was clearly in denial. *There's no way a third cat could be sick. Rosebloom was isolated yesterday. The greencough couldn't possibly be spreading. Could it..?*

"Can't you smell it? Sheeptail is ill, Swift. Or getting there. Bumblethroat and Rosebloom have already been confirmed to have something. It's better we be safe than sorry," Shadowfang insisted in return. Swiftcloud huffed, sitting down. Shadowfang came to stand in front of her, as if he could protect her from the possible disease with his body.

"Sheeptail, dear, why don't you go and have a little chat with Goldensong?" Quailbelly suggested to the tom, shielded behind the large form of Frostfeather.

Sheeptail lifted his head weakly. He nodded then rose to his paws, practically dragging himself out of the warrior's den. Swiftcloud's denmates let out a collective sigh once the senior warrior was out of sight. They moved back to their usual nests, tension still heavy in the atmosphere. Shadowfang shook out his pelt to rid himself of his nerves.

"I'm sorry about that. But we can't risk you catching whatever he may have," the black tom mewed, bumping his head against Swiftcloud's chin. Swiftcloud nodded in understanding, licking Shadowfang on his muzzle before settling down with him in their shared nest.

More coughing erupted outside in the morning when the warriors awoke once more. Slugsnout and Snailear were paired together, herded by concerned clanmates over to the medicine den. At a safe distance, of course. And in the days to come, more cats would follow. Meadowcall, Ladybugbite, Boulderfall, Seedpaw, and a few of the clan's kits were among them. Too many cats to house in the medicine den. A decision was made to move all sick cats to one location. Anyone with even the slightest cough was isolated in the elder's den, sending the displaced elders to live with the warriors for a while. After all, the den was halfway vacant.
Things stayed pretty contained, or at least for a few days. Then another case of greencough would make itself known, and Whitestar would begrudgingly have to order another cat to quarentine.
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rassclan's warriors were dropping like flies, and at the worst possible time. Leafbare fully settled upon the Land's Star; most prey had gone into hiding or hibernation for the season. The snow remained ever present on the meadow, making the world seem that much bleaker. Cats were hungrier now than they'd been in previous moons. And that drove the remaining healthy warriors to work themselves to the bone, as they tried to provide for the rest of the clan.
Swiftcloud was no different. Sometimes, she'd stay out long into the night trying to find a bite to eat. And when she'd catch something, the prey always went right to the queens. She made sure to that.

Three quarter moons had passed since the first cat had been diagnosed with greencough. By now it'd been two days since Swiftcloud had anything to eat. Her belly ached, so badly that she felt as if she were dying. She had no idea why she felt so awful. She'd grown used to hunger by now. Despite the risk of going, she decided to take herself to the medicine den. Maybe the medicine cats would have an herb that would cure the knawing pain in her intestines. Luckily no sick cats were in the den at this time. Mistyleaf and Snowfrost sat within the tree trunk's confines alone, shuffling through a pile of herbs.

"Do you think there's enough here to provide everyone a dose?" Mistyleaf asked. Snowfrost twitched her whiskers.

"Hardly," she admitted. "Hopefully enough to at least dull their symptoms. Adding in chickweed might help. Oh- and we'll need to add some tansy to Rosebloom's mixture today. She's running a fever."

Swiftcloud felt bad for pulling the healers away from their work, but she was desperate. "Um, excuse me?" She meeped.

"Swiftcloud!" Mistyleaf perked up. "What's wrong? You don't appear to be sick. How are you feeling?"

"My stomach hurts. It feels as though my insides are missing," she explained with a grimace.

Mistyleaf stepped away from her task, sniffing her friend. "Hm. When was the last time you ate?"

Swiftcloud blinked. The thought of food had barely crossed her mind recently. "Ate..? Um...well, I can't remember honestly. All the prey I've caught I've used to feed the queens and kits."

"But you didn't think to save some for yourself?" Snowfrost snorted.

Swiftcloud shrank in her fur. "The Code says queens and elders eat before the warriors."

"And you didn't think that the Warrior Code may want you to save at least a mouthful of food for yourself? You're a adult, Swiftcloud

use your head!" The medicine cat snapped. Snowfrost gave her head a shake, putting her focus back on her herbs. She muttered to herself as she sorted through her supplies, clearly agitated by Swiftcloud's ignorance. "Warriors and their pride, I swear it's obnoxious sometimes."

"Snowfrost has a point," Mistyleaf agreed. "I'm sure the reason your stomach feels so bad is because you've been starving yourself." *Starving..?* That was a concept Swiftcloud hadn't been familiar with before. In her life she'd barely known hunger, yet alone something so severe. A luxury, perhaps, she was granted due to being born a kittypet. Swiftcloud had known of starvation, but never realized it would make her feel so hollow. For a brief moment, Swiftcloud thought back to the day she had been invited to join the clan. Whitestar had warned about the dangers of Leafbare. The fierce cold, the lack of food. And yet, despite facing it all now Swiftcloud had no regrets. She would always be happy to be part of Grassclan, even if she had to go hungry.
"You need to go have something to eat." Mistyleaf's voice cut into Swiftcloud's thoughts. "Consider this a medicine cat's orders. And if anyone should gripe at you about it, tell them they can come speak to us."
Swiftcloud nodded weakly, eyes wide in shock at the stern tone Mistyleaf had acquired. She was too stunned to speak, in too much pain to even think. Instead, Swiftcloud turned herself around and brought herself out to the fresh-kill pile. The pile was the smallest that she had ever seen it. Swiftcloud knew a hunting party had recently returned home. Yet there was only a half sized mouse and a scrawny vole to choose from. Swiftcloud didn't care which she ate, all she knew now was that she needed this food. Just the smell of it alone reminded her of how hungry she truly was.
Out of desperation she gave into her temptations. Swiftcloud quickly snatched up the vole, pulling it close to her chest. The first bite she took was glorious. The flavors sang loudly on her tongue, and her stomach begged her to eat more. Swiftcloud consumed the rest of her meal in a matter of heartbeats, the delicious meat of the vole disappearing inside of her all too soon. For a moment, Swiftcloud felt satisfied. But the sight of the mouse still sitting there on the icy ground was calling to her. *Well...I haven't eaten in a while. And Mistyleaf did say to eat, so...* Swiftcloud got back to her paws.

With claws extended she gripped the mouse up and pulled it towards her. As she was about to settle down to eat again, Rabbitstorm appeared through the bramble tunnel. His eyes were sunken, his expression miserable. In his grasp he held nothing, despite returning home from hunting. The lynx point tom practically dragged himself over to Swiftcloud, slumping into the snow as he sat beside her. Swiftcloud resisted the urge to whimper. She hated seeing her friend so defeated. Since Heatherwing had died, Rabbitstorm hadn't been the same. He was more work driven, and a bit snappier with others. It was almost as if he'd reverted back to an apprentice again; in personality at least. Although Rabbitstorm had become a bit clingier. When he wasn't doing work, he was spending time with his mother or siblings. And when they were too busy, he'd come to spend time with Swiftcloud. She was honored, honestly, that Rabbitstorm found comfort in her company. At least she thought he did. It was hard to tell. Regardless, Rabbitstorm's constant presence reassured her at least that the bond they had formed hadn't shifted back with his attitude.

Despite her stomach growling at her, urging her to go back to eating, Swiftcloud refused to do so. Instead, she pushed the mouse over to Rabbitstorm, showing him a soft smile. "Here. I think you could use this more than I can right now," she meowed. "I know it's not much, but-"

"Thank you," Rabbitstorm interrupted with a sigh of relief. He lowered his head, taking small bites of the prey in front of him. He leaned his larger body against Swiftcloud's, warming her with his long fur. Swiftcloud felt grateful for the tom's presence, and was happy to have a friend like him. In the beginning, Rabbitstorm had hated Swiftcloud. The two were practically rivals, insulting each other, playing tricks on one another. But after many moons they were finally getting along. Sure on occasion the two would pass on snarky remarks, but now it was all in good fun. Rabbitstorm wasn't such a bad cat. And Swiftcloud hoped that he thought the same of her.
Rabbitstorm let out a satisfied sigh as his mouse became nothing more than fur and bones. He purred, turning to groom Swiftcloud's shoulder. In return she cleaned his. For a few moments the pair shared tongues, comfortable in the silence that had settled between

them. But a gust of cold wind blew through the camp, making the warriors jump to their paws. In silent agreement they walked with each other to enter the warmth of the warriors' den.
Here, the remaining healthy warriors of the clan were taking shelter. Most had been out not long ago, finishing patrols and returning empty pawed from their hunting parties. A gloom seemed to hang heavy in the hollowed stone den. Swiftcloud saw depression in some cats eyes. In one way or another, every cat was connected to the ill or starving. If they weren't among those directly suffering.
Quietly in the back of the den, Swiftcloud could see Cloverpetal crying. She hadn't eaten in nearly a quarter moon, and Swiftcloud knew the other molly was reaching her breaking point. But still, she refused food. She wanted everyone else to eat instead. Cloverpetal was a quiet, kind soul. She would never complain about anything, and would give someone the fur off her back if they needed it. But Swiftcloud thought the pale calico molly was being foolish. Still, she wouldn't say anything. Not long ago Swiftcloud was doing the same exact thing. She knew she had no right to judge.
In the center of the den, the clan's two remaining elders laid. Tornface was grooming his pelt, possibly trying to warm himself. While Smokesnout lay curled in a ball, his son Shadowfang beside him. The two toms were not very close, but Shadowfang still respected his father. In this trying time he was determined to provide the elderly tom some support, especially since he was the only family Smokesnout had left. Swiftcloud admired that in her mate. He cared, even if he didn't have much reason to. Smokesnout wasn't much of a father; he never showed the same compassion for his kit as Ashwhisker, the dam of his litter, did. But Shadowfang wouldn't hold it against him. Some cats weren't cut out to be parents.
Swiftcloud touched her nose to Rabbitstorm's ear gently as she tiptoed towards the center of the den. She settled by Shadowfang's side, giving his cheek a good rub with her own. Shadowfang purred a little from her affection, a warm glow in his eyes. But the glow swiftly dimmed as he turned his gaze back onto Smokesnout.

"He's gone," Shadowfang whispered only loud enough for his mate to hear.

Swiftcloud blinked in confusion. "W..what?"

"Smokesnout," Shadowfang clarified, licking the dusky elder's still shoulder. "He's dead."

Swiftcloud felt her heart drop into her paws, a ringing dulling her hearing. "What do you mean he's dead? H-how? When...?" She stammered, voice low.

Shadowfang sighed, looking melancholy. "A little while ago. I noticed he stopped breathing... But he's so peaceful, I don't want to take him from his nest yet."

"Shadowfang..." Swiftcloud pressed herself into her mate. "I'm so sorry.... But, we shouldn't keep him here anymore. The clan will want to know he's gone; they'll want to mourn him."

"I know," Shadowfang sighed once more, rising to his paws. He bent his head, griping Smokesnout's body by the scruff. Swiftcloud stood to be with them. At once, the focus of the entire den fell upon them. Every cat's eyes were dark; a knowing look passing between each of them. Shadowfang tried not to pay attention, wanting to ignore the pity that would soon be passed onto him. Rabbitstorm came over as the mates began to take the elder out of the den. He moved to Smokesnout's free side, helping Shadowfang carry his father. The three warriors emerged into the windy Leaf-bare evening, placing Smokesnout's body in the center of camp. Here he would have an easier time traveling to Starclan, and here the rest of the clan could come to properly say goodbye.

"I should tell my dad," Shadowfang realized. "Im not sure if he'll come out right away, though. Pigeon isn't doing well... But, I know him. He'll at least want to send Smokesnout off with a prayer." With his reasoning voice, the sleek black tom turned, stalking to the elder's den.

"I'll go inform the medicine cats," Rabbitstorm decided, heading off in the opposite direction.
Swiftcloud sat alone in the cold empty clearing, awaiting the arrival of others. She stood there, in the whistling wind, staring at the body in front of her. Smokesnout's fur ruffled in the breeze, the only movement to come from the elderly tom. Shadowfang had made sure to lay him down nicely. The old tom appeared as though he

had fallen asleep. It was almost eerie.
This was the first casualty of many to come, Swiftcloud realized. The knowledge of that filled her with a terrible sense of dread. She knew things would only get worse from here on. And yet, there was still a small glimmer of hope left inside of her. The gathering would be soon. Maybe Grassclan could ask for prey and herbs from some of the others. The chances were slim, Swiftcloud knew, but she had to keep her chin up. If she gave up hope now, what else would she have?

Chapter 40

Relief remained just out of reach of Grassclan in the following half moon. So many in the clan were ill, and the path to self recovery seemed long off. Every kit in the nursery had caught greencough except for Lightkit. Two queens managed to keep well. However, Cricketsong and Ashwhisker were miserable. They were working themselves just as tirelessly as the remaining warriors. They had to, if not for the clan, then for their young kits.
There were only ten cats left able to hunt, not including the medicine cats. Cloverpetal and Bumblethroat had died a quarter moon ago from starvation. Rosebloom and Beetlepatch were barely clinging on to life. And worst of all, there wasn't enough herbs to heal everyone. The Gathering this moon proved to be unhelpful. Every clan was suffering the same as Grassclan; even Treeclan who they'd aided earlier in the season. There was nothing left in the Land's Star for anyone to spare. Or at least, that's what the clans had claimed. A distinct memory had seared itself into Swiftcloud's mind. The looks on the medicine cat's faces at the Gathering were guilty. It was anyone's guess as to why. Some of Grassclan had speculated it was because the medicine cats were not permitted to share their herbs. While more sympathetic cats believed it was because they felt helpless.
At home, Snowfrost was being stingy with the last bit of the clan's catmint. Mistyleaf suggested giving the herb to the kits. And Goldensong insisted the catmint go to Rosebloom. But none of those options seemed to be good enough candidates. Snowfrost kept making excuses, reasoning that the catmint would be better used on those who weren't so weak, and cats that didn't wish to die in order to be reunited with their dead lovers. Although angry, cats didn't seem willing to argue about this. Snowfrost was the clan's most senior medicine cat. She'd handled bad Leafbares before, she knew what she was doing. But Swiftcloud felt a pang of doubt inside of her. She wondered if Snowfrost was holding onto the herb in case anyone she cared about might become ill.

One day, when the sun briefly decided to shine, Swiftcloud sat out

in Grassclan's clearing. In the morning she had gone on a hunting patrol, with a bit more success than normal. In a little while, she would go out to hunt again. But for now, the white and black patched molly would enjoy some free time, sunbathing by Tall Stone. A few other cats settled around nearby, but a silence remain between them. From the peace and quiet surrounding her, Swiftcloud began to hear harsh sobbing coming from the nursery. In response she jumped to her paws, jerking herself into that direction to find out what the wailing was about. She crouched, peering beneath the honeysuckle bush's branches to get a glimpse of the cats inside. Cricketsong was sitting in her nest, head bowed and shoulders quaking. Snowfrost was in front of her, her silver tail swaying against the wool lined floor. It seemed the medicine cat had some grim news to share.

"I'm sorry," she sighed, "there was nothing I could do to save them. The last of your kits has passed on."

Hearing the words only seemed to make Cricketsong cry more. Snowfrost remained in place as the grieving queen collapsed under the weight of her sorrow. Her cries seemed to echo through the whole of Grassclan's camp. Swiftcloud could feel the eyes of her clanmates on the back of her head. *They must all be wondering about the news.*

"You took my kits away from me, you fox-heart...!" Swiftcloud caught Cricketsong saying, pausing to catch her breath. "Why would you let this happen..? You have the herbs. Why couldn't you use them? Because your kits were taken away from you? Did you want others to understand how you feel? Does it bring you pleasure, to be so cruel?"
Swiftcloud's ears pricked immediately. *Her kits..? Snowfrost was a* mother*?*

Snowfrost's ears flattered against her head, a paw raised up to her chest in shock. Though her eyes narrowed, the medicine forced herself to be calm. "I have done nothing wrong," Snowfrost's voice was sure. "I did all I could with the resources that I have left." The medicine cat went out of her way to avoid making mention of her own kittens. Nor did she properly respond to Cricketsong's accusations. Or perhaps it only felt that way to Swiftcloud. She

wanted to learn more about this new information. How had she not known before that Snowfrost had a litter? Maybe it was a secret kept among the queens? Swiftcloud knew they had their own Code to follow. Maybe hiding secrets like this was part of it. Still, curiousity burrowed itself into her brain like a tick to an elder's pelt. She needed to know more. But before she could even think about listening in to discover further information, Swiftcloud was spotted. Snowfrost locked eyes with the younger molly, a darkness within her icy gaze. Swiftcloud gulped, backing away from the den almost immediately. Her pelt burned hot with embarrassment. How could she let herself be so obvious?
With a rough shake, Swiftcloud was able to help the feeling mostly fade. But to cure her fluster completely, and to gather together her thoughts, Swiftcloud decided to take out an early hunting party. She called for the apprentices, Pollenpaw and Tulippaw. Then she padded over to speak with Frostfeather, who stood in front of the medicine den.

"Hey Frostfeather, wanna come with us on a hunting patrol?" She asked.

"Sure! Oh, but Im waiting for Rabbitstorm to finish getting his exam. He was feeling a little under the weather today, and mama forced him to get a check up. She actually dragged him over here herself, can you believe that? Sick with greencough and still stong enough to carry a fully grown tom by the scruff across camp!" Frostfeather seemed to be in high spirits today, although that was how she normally behaved. However it was unusual to see her so cheerful during such a grim time. Most of her family had caught greencough; Pansypaw and Quailbelly too. And now, there was the possibility that Rabbitstorm was also sick. How wasn't Frostfeather freaking out or depressed? Maybe being happy was how she coped. Or perhaps it was all a facade, put on to keep cats from worrying. Swiftcloud wished she could figure out what the case might be. But she didn't want to press the matter. Every cat handled hard times differently. Swiftcloud didn't want to judge.
Out from under the medicine den tree, Rabbitstorm emerged. His eyes were a bit sunken, fur dull, but his head was held high. It was hard to tell if the lynx point tom was ill, or just tired.

"Hey!" Frostfeather greeted her brother with a gentle head bump. "How'd it go? What did Goldensong say?"

"Goldensong's not here," Rabbitstorm grunted. "She's in the elder's den with the rest of the sick cats... So apparently, Snowfrost's taken over as head medicine cat."
Swiftcloud and Frostfeather gasped in unison. Did that mean Goldensong had caught greecough too?
"Snowfrost said I'm fine though. I just have to take it easy," Rabbitstorm finished speaking.

"Are you well enough to come hunting?" Frostfeather queried, worry hidden behind her sing-song voice.

"Should be. I'll make sure I don't do a lot of running, so I don't become fatigued," Rabbitstorm reasoned with a nonchalant shrug.
Swiftcloud and Frostfeather exchanged a glance but didn't try to pursue further conversation on the matter.
With a flick of her ear, Swiftcloud led her patrol to the bramble tunnel, down the hill and out into the frozen meadow. Their destination was yet to be determined, but wherever they would go, Swiftcloud hoped the area would be rich with prey.

In Rabbit Gorge, it seemed that her prayers had been answered. Today, the sun had drawn a few of the rabbits out from their warren. A couple of their kits frolicked in the snow, their paws crunching on the icy surface. An older pair laid out soaking in the sunshine, a content look on their yummy faces.
Swiftcloud could feel her belly rumble. The sight of the rabbits made her realize she'd forgotten to eat again. But her hunger gave her drive. If her patrol could catch all of this prey, every cat in the clan could have a chance to eat today.

"Tulippaw, Pollenpaw, come with me. The three of us are going to flush the rabbits out. Frostfeather, Rabbitstorm, be ready. Don't let any of the prey escape."
The cats of her patrol nodded agreeingly. Frostfeather bounced lightly in place, flicking her tail against Rabbitstorm's ear. Rabbitstorm was slow to respond, glancing at his sister to give a playful but tired glare. The littermates stalked off to hide behind a mound of snow, ready to ambush any rabbits who'd skitter into

their path.
Swiftcloud made a motion with her head, prompting the apprentices to follow her lead. The three of them drew close to the rabbit's warren. Swiftcloud turned briefly to speak with the apprentices in the Silent Language. She instructed each molly to hunt in different a direction, herding the rabbits towards the same path. Swiftcloud then planned to give chase, scaring their prey towards Rabbitstorm and Frostfeather, where they'd be caught and killed.
Tulippaw and Pollenpaw grinned with excitement, scurrying off to complete their tasks while Swiftcloud lay in wait. The soft thud of paws scrambling through the snow alerted her to the prey's approach soon after. Quickly, the rabbits came into view. Swiftcloud struck out like a bolt of lightning, scaring the prey more. One sperated from the group, leaving it vulnerable and easy to catch. Swiftcloud pounced on the unfortunate creature, snapping it's neck, painlessly ending it's life. The pitiful squeals of the other three rabbits rung out, before being swallowed up by the meadow's silence. Swiftcloud grabbed her catch by the scruff, carrying it over to the rest of the patrol.
Rabbitstorm and Tulippaw worked together to catch and kill one particularly large rabbit. Pollenpaw and Frostfeather, meanwhile, had finished off the other two on their own. Swiftcloud smiled behind her prey. Their hunt had been a complete success. Tonight, the clan would feast, better than they had in moons.
The journey home took longer than it should have. While the mollies trotted on ahead, Rabbitstorm kept falling behind. Swiftcloud guessed it was because he was tired. Tulippaw eventually fell back to help the young warrior. She allowed him to lean against her, while she helped grab hold of his prey. Rabbitstorm glanced at her gratefully, able to keep pace a little better with the assist.
It was a relief when the patrol was finally able to return home. Swiftcloud's paws felt numb from the cold, and she could use a warm meal to restore her strength from the hunt. With her companions, she delivered her catch to the fresh-kill pile. Accomplished, Swiftcloud could begin to relax. That was, until a cat came to interrupt.

"What in Starclan's name do you think you are doing?!" Snowfrost

snapped. Swiftcloud twisted around to look at the angry medicine cat, disturbed by her yowling. "Why isn't Rabbitstorm in the elder's den like I instructed?"

"Was he supposed to be?" Swiftcloud questioned, a brow raising.

"Wait wait wait-" Tulippaw interjected. She turned to Rabbitstorm. "Does that mean you're sick??" She gasped, backing away three fox-lengths. Her ears lowered, green eyes round with fear.

Rabbitstorm sniffled. "It's just a chill. I'm not as sick as the rest of the clan. I was still able to hunt."

"But you are still *sick*. You shouldn't have been out of your den. Muchless out in the meadow catching prey." Snowfrost padded up to the fluffy lynx point tom, flanking him. She grabbed him by the scruff, tugging on it to try and lead him away.

Rabbitstorm pulled himself from the medicine cat's grip, fixing her with an icy glare. "I'm *fine* Snowfrost," he insisted. "There isn't anything wrong with m-" before he could say more, the fluffy tom broke out into a coughing fit. His eyelids drooped, head lowering with fatigue. Clearly, he was far from alright. In fact, Swiftcloud feared their hunting expedition might have made Rabbitstorm worse.

Snowfrost lifted her muzzle, "Uhuh," she responded snobbishly. "As I'd diagnosed earlier, you have whitecough. Come along now, you braisen kit. Let's get you inside where it's warm." Once again the medicine pressed her flank against Rabbitstorm. This time he did not recoil against her touch. He allowed himself to be guided away, silently admitting his defeat.

"Frostfeather, Swiftcloud. See to it that the prey Rabbitstorm brought back is disposed of. We don't want anyone eating that rabbit. Starclan forbid another cat fall ill from it," Snowfrost commanded before they'd walked too far away.

"Yes, Snowfrost," both mollies meowed in unison. They watched as Rabbitstorm and Snowfrost disappeared from sight, turning their attention to the fresh-kill pile afterwards. The rabbits they had

brought home looked too similar to distinguish. Finding the one Rabbitstorm had carried would be tricky. Swiftcloud leaned down to give each one a sniff, hoping scent would reveal the hunter of each piece of prey. But between the fresh smell of warm meat and the snow, it was hard to detect any cat-scent. Frostfeather lended her nose to the effort, standing straight once she'd given up.

"I think it might have been this one." The silver and white tabby pointed at one of the rabbits with her tail. It was obvious that she was guessing. But a guess was better than nothing at all.

"I don't know, Frostfeather. Maybe we should discard them all. Just to be safe."

"No way. The clan needs this food. Throwing away four decently sized rabbits in Leafbare would a crime! And a huge waste." Frostfeather twitched her whiskers, a look of confidence crossing her features. "Besides, I'm positive that I've chosen the contaminated rabbit. I'm a very good guesser. Plus I'm pretty sure the spot that it's in is the place Rabbitstorm placed his kill."

Swiftcloud's fur prickled with discomfort. "I don't know..." she wanted to protest against her friend's logic. But as she thought of what to say, the words seemed to escape her.

"It'll be fiiine, I promise. Look, I'll prove it." Frostfeather snatched up the supposed bad rabbt, pushing it away from the fresh-kill pile. She then grabbed another, pulling it towards herself. She dipped her head and pulled away at the creature's fur. And before Swiftcloud could say a word, Frostfeather had already taken a bite. The silver and white tabby chewed slowly. She swallowed her food leisurely, licking her lips with a satisfied smack.

"*Mm.* See? There isn't anything wrong with this food!" Frostfeather purred out. Swiftcloud was still skeptical. She observed her friend for a while, waiting to see if she'd start to feel unwell. But by the time Frostfeather had finished half the rabbit, nothing had happened.
Swiftcloud was satisfied with that result, moving over to share some of the prey.

"Yeah Swiftcloud!" Frostfeather cheered as the patched molly took a bite. The meat tasted fine, and smelled as delectable as ever. Perhaps their guess was correct after all. But only time would tell. After the mollies had finished their meal, the pair moved on to warm up in the warrior's den.

A while passed. The den grew dark as the sun finally set for the evening. The remainder of the clan's healthy warriors returned to the calm of the shelter. Shadowfang was the last cat to appear. He climbed into his shared nest with Swiftcloud, licking her muzzle in greetings. He appeared to be recently fed, by the smell of rabbit on his breath.

"Did you have a good day today?" Swiftcloud asked.

Shadowfang nodded. "Ashwhisker's doing well. I went to check on the kits for him today. The three of us shared some prey, and I gave them a good wash while they fell asleep. They're such good kittens. I only pray that they survive all of this. They'll be excellent warriors some day."

"I'm sure they'll recover," Swiftcloud assured. A flashback of earlier in the day crossed her mind; the news of Cricketsong's litter dying. Swiftcloud spressed a shutter, and pushed the memory away, silently hoping the same fate would not meet these kits. Her worry did not dissipate however, and she decided it was best not to discuss any more of their clanmates right now. "How about we get some shut eye, hm? You must be pretty tired. I know I am." Shadowfang nodded in agreement, letting out a loud yawn. The mates pulled themselves closer, curling their bodies around each other's to warm up. The comfort of one another's presence was enough to lull both warriors into a comfortable, peaceful slumber.

The next morning, Swiftcloud was woken by the sound of groaning. Shadowfang still laid beside her, separated from her grasp. His body was curled, his paws pressing into his head. He trembled slightly in their shared nest, and his breathing sounded irregular. A worrying sight.

"Shadowfang?" Swiftcloud sat up. "What's wrong?"

"I..I think I need to see a medicine cat," he confessed. The tom blinked up at his mate with dull eyes, pain clear within them.

"Oh Starclan, alright. Come on, I'll take you to the den."

"No," Shadowfang countered, forcing himself onto shaky legs. "I don't want to risk you getting sick. I can walk myself."

"We've been laying together since sunset. I've already been contaminated. There's no point in trying to stay separate now," Swiftcloud pointed out, standing up to support him. Shadowfang let out a defeated sigh, padding along with his mate to the medicine den.
Upon entry, Snowfrost and Mistyleaf could already tell there was something wrong. Snowfrost stood, swaying her tail.

"Stars. Not another one." Swiftly she brought herself to Shadowfang. She gave him a good sniff, pushing a paw against his flank. "Lay on the ground for me," she instructed. Swiftcloud took a pace back and sat down to observe as Shadowfang followed orders. Snowfrost sat down by Shadowfang's belly, placing a paw on his chest.
"Take a few long, deep breaths."
Shadowfang did as he was told. With every inhale the medicine cat put her ear closer to the tom's flank. After every exhaled she moved her paw slightly. After one final large breath, Shadowfang began to wheeze.

"Mhm, I knew it. Greencough. We'll need to move him into the elder's den right away."
Snowfrost spoke to Mistyleaf, standing back up. Shadowfang lowered his ears, and Swiftcloud resisted the urge to wail. *Oh my poor Shadowfang...*
Mistyleaf left no time for the mates to mour or worry. She herded Shadowfang away to the back of the den, where another sick cat was staying. Frostfeather was in a nest, laying on her back. Crust formed around her nose and her usually perky personality was dull, almost silenced. The newly sick warriors greeted each other, awaiting instructions from the medicine cats. But before she could direct them to the elder's den, it seemed like Snowfrost had some investigating to do. She turned, approaching Swiftcloud.

"Did you or did you not throw away that contaminated prey yesterday?" The medicine cat questioned accusingly.

"We did!" Frostfeather insisted hoarsely from the back of the den."Or at least..I think we did? We uh..we weren't sure exactly which one was Rabbitstorm's..."

Snowfrost glared at the tabby molly crossly. "And you didn't think to get rid of all the rabbits?"

"We couldn't," Swiftcloud defended. "The clan needed prey."

"It's-it's better for a cat to eat and catch a curable disease than to leave them hungry and gaurentee death by starvation, right?" Frostfeather chimed with a sniffle. Mistyleaf shook her head slowly, resting her tail on Frostfeather's shoulders.

Snowfrost stared at her niece, emotions unreadable. "That logic makes about as much sense as a flying hedgehog." She sighed. "Well, no use crying over past decisions. What's done is done. We need to focus on the present. Shadowfang, Frostfeather, it's time we move you to your new den." Snowfrost moved to herd the sick cats together, helping each to their paws and making them use each other for support.

"Swiftcloud... would you mind staying here for an extra heartbeat?" Mistyleaf requested softly as she approached the other molly.

"Uh..sure," Swiftcloud responded nervously. She moved to touch her nose to Shadowfang's forehead. It already felt warm, which only served to worry Swiftcloud more. "I'll come visit you soon," she promised.

"You better." Shadowfang smiled weakly, flicking his mate's ear with his tail-tip. Snowfrost passed each sick cat a bundle of wool then escorted them out of her den. Swiftcloud watched on longingly. She didn't want to leave Shadowfang. But she knew if she spent to much time around him, she would get sick too. And she knew her mate wouldn't want that. And what would Mistyleaf think? Though she wanted to be with the cats she loved, Swiftcloud knew she had to take care of herself first.

The medicine den felt quite spacious today, with only Swiftcloud and Mistyleaf left within its confines. Swiftcloud resisted the urge to look away bashfully as she caught the medicine cat's eyes on her.

"Tell me, Swiftcloud, I'm curious. When you lived with the Twolegs, did they ever take you to see the Cutter?"

"The Cutter?" Swiftcloud parroted, unfamiliar with this clan term.

"I think Snowfrost said kittypets call it the vet," Mistyleaf elaborated, twitching her whiskers.

"Oh! Well, um, yes, actually."

Mistyleaf hummed thoughtfully. "And what did they do to you when you were there?

Swiftcloud shuffled her paws. "When I was there, the vet gave me an exam. Then they jabbed me a few times with a long silver thorn before putting me back into my cage."

Mistyleaf perked up. "Ooh. Very interesting... I think I've figured out why you haven't been affected by greencough, like the rest of the clan. Its seems that you might have an immunity to it. At least for this season."

"How are you sure?" Swiftcloud questioned. The news was to good to be true.

"This may sound strange. But I believe the vet injected you with something; some kind of liquid Twoleg herbs. The thorn might have been more like a mosquito's mouth, able to take and transfer things in and out of a cat's body. In this case, it would be a preventative herb for disease."

"So I... can't get sick?" Swiftcloud asked.

Mistyleaf nodded, eyes twinkling. "That makes you a great asset during this time," she responded, taking a step closer to the other molly. "Swiftcloud, I would like to ask you for a favor. Would you be willing to act as a temporary medicine cat's assistant? Mind you, I don't make offers like this lightly. But Snowfrost and I could use

the extra help."

Swiftcloud's mouth gaped slightly. She didn't know exactly what to say. But as she thought about what this job may mean, it began to grow more appealing. Becoming a medicine cat's assistant would allow her to visit sick clanmates. And it would also mean she could be more useful to the clan. After careful consideration, she was ready to give her answer.

"Of course I'll help you, Mistyleaf. It'll be an honor to assist you and Snowfrost however I can."

Mistyleaf smiled brightly. "Excellent. In that case, we'll start training you right away! The sooner you know what you're doing, the better."

Chapter 41

"Stay still, Thornkit," Swiftcloud instructed the little tabby tom, holding a bundle of herbs up to his muzzle. The concoction was coated in honey, a clever technique used to disguise the taste of medicine. Swiftcloud had learned this trick over the past several days, along with many other skills required of her as a medicine cat's assistant.
"Now open wide." The patched molly shoveled the mixture into Thornkit's mouth, helping him shut his jaws before he could spit anything out. The little tom swallowed the herbs, shivering as they slid down his throat.

"Eww, gross!" He hacked. Swiftcloud chuckled softly.

"I tried to cover it as best as I could. Honey can only do so much," she remarked as she licked her paw clean of the sticky substance. "Mistyleaf said these herbs should help settle you cough. Hopefully soothe the pain in your chest too. You should get some rest now. I'll come check up on you later, alright?"

"Thank you, Swiftcloud," Thornkit mewed, tucking his paws beneath him inside his nest. Swiftcloud tipped her head to him, turning tail and walking out of the elder's's den. She gave a sigh as she emerged, glancing up at the sky above.
Today was a nice day. Too bad nobody could enjoy it. Most of the clan was sick. Almost everyone Swiftcloud cared about. Hardly any cat was healing, even with all the different poultices and mixtures the medicine cats created. The only cats who'd managed to recovered from being sick were Goldensong and Rabbitstorm. Both cats had been infected with whitecough. But it only took some hawkweed and tansy for Goldensong to be back on her paws, thanks to her body's previous experiences with the illness. But Rabbitstorm was another case. He'd never had whitecough before, not even so much as a sniffle. According to Mistyleaf, his body shouldn't have been able to rid itself of sickness so quickly. Snowfrost regarded it as a miracle.

"He's a very lucky tom," she'd said after discharging Rabbitstorm from his sick leave. "He was blessed with a strong immune system. He was able to fight off that whitecough all on his own. Though having medicine cats as kin doesn't hurt either." She smiled briefly, but it quickly turned into a frown. It was as if she had hated the words she'd spoken.

It's very strange that of all cats, Rabbitstorm is the only one to recover so far "naturally". I wonder if Snowfrost had a part to play in that? Swiftcloud pondered as she started moving on to her next destination. During an herb packing lesson, she recalled the medicine cat mentioning the remains of her catmint supply. She was saving them for someone who needed them most. Had she decided that cat was her nephew? Swiftcloud could only assume. If that were the case though, it was cruel. Plenty of other cats were in more dire need of some catmint right now. One of those clanmates being Swiftcloud's next patient.

The white and black patched she-cat gathered some moss from the side of the apprentice's den. She took it over to a nearby puddle, placing it down to let it to fill with water. Saturated, the moss was carried over to Tall Stone, and taken into the crack beneath to be given to the clan's sickest warrior. Whitestar lay quietly in her nest by the back of the den. Her head lifted weakly as she acknowledged her caretaker's presence. Swiftcloud dipped her head to the leader respectfully, placing the soaked moss close to her so that she may drink. She watched the leader as she struggled to take sips, resting her head on her paws when she'd had her fill.

Two days ago Whitestar had begun to show symptoms of whitecough. Today, she was barely hanging on by a hair. Her condition had rapidly developed into greencough, debilitating the leader and rendering her nest ridden. The only cat allowed to visit her was Swiftcloud. She was too contagious for anyone else to come near. Not even the medicine cats, who mostly had an immunity built against the disease, could see her. Swiftcloud had made it her mission to give Whitestar the best care she possibly could. Between hunting, tending to the sick, and herb lessons, Swiftcloud spent the remainder of her time in the Tall Stone. She gave Whitestar news, and tried keeping her spirits up. At this point that's all that could be done. Without catmint, the leader showed no improvement in health. Nothing else was working, no matter how hard the medicine

cats tried. But Swiftcloud wasn't ready to give up. She couldn't let Grassclan's leader die.
When she could, Swiftcloud spent her time in the medicine den. There, Snowfrost would teach her about herbs and their uses. More importantly she'd show Swiftcloud the ones she'd need to treat greencough, and taught her how to mix them properly. It was tough work, and it didn't help that Snowfrost was an inpatient mentor, but Swiftcloud stuck through it. She had to, for her Grassclan's sake. For Whitestar's sake.
Often Mistyleaf was there to assist, and offered to give Swiftcloud follow up lessons when Snowfrost's teaching weren't getting through. The younger medicine cat was also in charge of showing Swiftcloud where to locate herbs-at least the ones they could still find. The two mollies bonded during this period, spending what little time they had available together. Swiftcloud cherished these moments, though she wished she could enjoy them more. Usually she was too busy worrying about the rest of her loved ones. She couldn't stop thinking about Whitestar, Shadowfang, and Tulippaw, who'd fallen ill so suddenly. But Mistyleaf understood. She was patient, sympathetic, and caring. She let Swiftcloud discuss her feelings and shared some of her own, usually cuddling with the other molly the whole time.
Swiftcloud couldn't help but smile as she thought about Mistyleaf. But a cough from Whitestar pulled her right from her daydreaming.

"How are you feeling today?" Swiftcloud stepped up to touch her nose to Whitestar's forehead.

Whitestar gave a small sigh, blinking lethargically. "Tired," she mumbled, voice scratchy. "so very very tired..."
Swiftcloud hesitated for a few heartbeats as she tried to get an accurate reading on the leader's temperature. Whitestar's forehead felt hot. She was burning a terrible fever. *I'd better bring her some feverfew to help bring it down. Maybe some lavender, too,* Swiftcloud decided. As she pulled back from the leader, the white and black patched molly noticed something on her face. On Whitestar's forehead, in the place Swiftcloud had just touched, there was an unusual scar. It was almost star shaped, covered over with a layer of fur, a lighter color than most of the leader's pelt. Swiftcloud wondered why she'd never noticed it before, but then again she'd

rarely been able to get so close to the siamese she-cat until now. Was the scar the mark of a leader? She wondered.

"Swiftcloud," Whitestar croaked as the young molly drew back further. "You must help," she was practically begging.

"Of course Whitestar," Swiftcloud responded softly. She assumed the leader was referring to her pain, wanting to be relieved of her illness. "I'll do whatever it takes to make you better."

Whitestar shook her head and let out a exasperated sigh. "The snow...the snow, it will destroy us. The Land's Star is in danger. Act quickly. You must make us stronger."
Swiftcloud looked on at the leader as she spoke, unable to understand her words. Was she referring to the dangers of Leafbare? Perhaps she feared greencough would wipe out the clans. Most likely, Whitestar was needlessly rambling. Snowfrost had mentioned cats could say strange things when they were feverish. Swiftcloud chalked Whitestar's message up to be just that.

"I'll be right back, I'm going to fetch some herbs, and more water for you to drink," Swiftcloud promised, turning around.

Whitestar wheezed slightly, her head sinking into her nest. Swiftcloud glanced over at the leader over her shoulder, noticing the shallow rise and fall of her chest begin to slow then still. Whitestar let out one final sigh and became completely motionless. Panic shot through Swiftcloud like a bolt of lightning. She turned once more and rushed to the leader's side, pressing an ear to her flank.

"No no no no no no!" She repeated to herself, unable to pick up on any breathing. Swiftcloud moved and put her head against Whitestar's chest, listening intently for the sound of a heartbeat. But the her chest remainded silent. Whitestar was dead.

"*No*!" Swiftcloud wailed, tears pooling in her eyes. She took a few paces back, hanging her head in defeat. Her body shook violently, blood roaring loudly in her ears. "Starclan, what is Grassclan going to do without their leader..? H..how am I going to tell Chicorynose that her sister is dead? That she's leader now..? That-"

Suddenly movement caught Swiftcloud's attention. From Whitestar's nest. The leader slowly began to stir, her head lifting to look at the hysterical she-cat across from her. She seemed puzzled.

"Swiftcloud..?" Whitestar mewed. "Why are you crying?"

"W..Whitestar!" Swiftcloud practically threw herself at the leader, covering her with frantic licks. "You're alright!! You're alive! But..but wait. How..?"
The siamese she-cat gave a big stretch, sitting up in her nest. She lifted a paw to lick and straighten her whiskers, blinking her eyes groggily. It was as if the leader had just woken up from a nap.

"Be calm, Swiftcloud. It would seem I've just lost one of my lives. Thankfully, though, I have a few to spare. I'd be on my way to the Twilight Passage otherwise."

"Lives..? You have more?" Swiftcloud stared at her leader, completely dumbfounded. She was sure Whitestar had been dead. Her scent had started to change and everything. But now the leader was alive, and appeared well. There was no trace of the greencough left in her. Not in her voice, or dulling her eyes. She didn't even smell sick anymore.

"As leader, I was granted nine lives by Starclan," Whitestar began to explain. "This gift is given to all true clan leaders. It is so that we may be able to protect and serve our clans for many years. A good leader will use their lives to sacrifice themselves in order to save the life of a clanmate. Although, it comes in handy when one falls ill as well."

Swiftcloud was stunned. "Nine lives..? I thought that was a myth! A tale the elders told to make leaders seem more powerful."

"On the contrary. The stories are quite true. You've just witnessed it, after all."

"So...how many live do you have left? Eight?"

"Three." Whitestar sighed. "Only three... I've been around for quite a while, Swiftcloud. And things are not always so safe or so peaceful

in our territory. But each life I've given has been for a good cause. I'd give up all the others if it meant protecting this clan. Never forget that." Whitestar rose to her paws. "I must make a request though. Typically, a leader's lives are supposed to remain a secret. Only the medicine cats and Code Keeper are allowed to know how many I have left. But I trust you, Swiftcloud. I hope that you will keep this secret as well."

"Of course, Whitestar. I won't tell a soul," Swiftcloud promised, dipping her head.

"Thank you. I have no doubts in you. You're a good cat. And a very hard worker. Now, your job here is complete. I thank you for taking such good care of me. But there are others who stil require your assistance. I am well again, though still in need of some rest. I'll be fine on my own."

"Are you sure?" Swiftcloud asked, a little worried.

"Yes. Now run along. I'm sure we'll see each other when it's time to eat. For now, I plan on taking a nap."

Swiftcloud felt relieved as she emerged from Tall Stone, accomplishment warming her chest. Another cat was well again, albeit from untraditional means. But at least it was another weight off her shoulders. Now Swiftcloud could invest more times in cats like Shadowfang and Tulippaw.

Swiftcloud scented cats coming through the bramble tunnel, deciding to turn to greet them. Through the barrier Snowfrost and Mistyleaf appeared. The older of the two seemed bored, while Mistyleaf appeared distraught. *They must have just returned from another herb scouting mission.*
Snowfrost waved off the medicine cat apprentice, padding off to be by herself in the medicine den. Mistyleaf stayed behind to approached Swiftcloud. She touched noses with the other molly, forcing a smile.

"You look happy," she commented.

"Whitestar's recovered from greencough," Swiftcloud announced.

"Did she?" Mistyleaf seemed surprised. "What combination of herbs finally worked?"

"None, but..." Though she wanted to explain, Swiftcloud was hesitant. She knew the clan's healers were aware of Whitestar's lives, but she'd promised not to tell anyone about what she'd seen. If Whitestar wanted anyone else to know she'd died, she would tell them herself.

"I think I understand," Mistyleaf piped suddenly. "Goldensong said that may be the only way she could be cured. Its a bittersweet resolution to the problem. Though some leaders aren't even lucky enough to recover after something like that. I'm glad Whitestar is ok, though. At least that's one good thing to come from today."

Swiftcloud tilted her head, sitting. "What do you mean? You haven't had any luck finding catmint?"

"Not at all..." Mistyleaf lowered her head, eyes darkening with sadness. She seemed to be resisting the urge to cry. Swiftcloud wondered if it was from frustration, or depression.
"It's hopeless... We've searched everywhere. There's no catmint left in the whole Land's Star. We even looked along the Twolegplace border; and still, nothing!" Mistyleaf fretted, ears folding back. "We'd have to look beyond the territories to even have a chance of finding anything now... Starclan, I hope Newleaf comes soon."

Swiftcloud watched her friend as she despaired. A feeling of guilt made her stomach twist.
Deep down, Swiftcloud knew she was to blame for all of this. If it hadn't been for her suggestion to visit Treeclan a moon and a half ago, no cat would have fallen ill. Greencough wouldn't have had a chance to spread between the clans. And so many cats would still be alive. Swiftcloud knew she had to make this right. Someway, somehow, she would find a solution. Something better than acting as a medicine cat's assistant. Lost, deep in contemplation, an idea became unconvered. Swiftcloud perked up immediately, hope welling in her chest.

"Mistyleaf. You just came up with a brilliant idea!" Swiftcloud jumped to her paws, surprising the other molly. "I can take you-! To

Twolegplace, I mean. If catmint grows at the edges of the territory, then there's bound to be some within it, too. Deep inside, beyond the border."

Mistyleaf's ears pricked slightly. "But it's dangerous to go to Twolegplace. What if we get lost? And Whitestar surely won't be pleased that we've gone there. Isn't that technically breaking the Warrior Code..?"

"We won't get lost," Swiftcloud assured. "I grew up there, remember? I still remember my way around. And it isn't against the Code. We aren't taking from Twolegs, just from the plants on their land. A land beyond our laws. Besides, it's not like we're leaving to become kittypets or anything."

"I don't know, Swiftcloud..." Mistyleaf sounded apprehensive. She shrank in place; a sign that she was not so eager to get up and explore the unknown. Even if it was for the greater good.

"Cats are *dying*, Mistyleaf. We need those herbs, and we don't have much time. This is our last hope," Swiftcloud stressed, looking at her friend; this beautiful cat that she was so fond of. The only cat that she cared about that hadn't become a victim of the sickness she'd unknowingly helped bring home.
But Mistyleaf avoid her gaze, unsure. Her fearscent was unmistakable. Swiftcloud knew that Mistyleaf was a stickler for the rules. She was strong, but still shy deep down. She wouldn't speak up to say no to the idea.

"I'm going to go find that catmint for you. Whether or not you tag along is your decision."

Mistyleaf bristled, her gaze snapping onto the patched she-cat in front of her. Mistyleaf and Swiftcloud stared at each other for a few tense moments. But a harsh cough finally drew their attention away. It came from the elder's den, deep and raspy. Swiftcloud's heart sank. That was Shadowfang, no doubt about it, and it sounded as if his greencough was getting worse. The recent memory of Whitestar dying popped into Swiftcloud's mind suddenly. The way her body stilled, the quietness of her chest, the reek of death. Swiftcloud's imagination quickly twisted the vision of the leader

and replaced it with her mate. The thought of Shadowfang winding up that way was more than she could bare.
Swiftcloud quickly tunred on her paws, ready to dash to the bramble tunnel and out of camp. She couldn't wait anymore. She couldn't sit here and do nothing while her mate was on the verge of dying. She didn't have another heartbeat to spare for Mistyleaf to make a decision. Action needed to be taken *now*. Swiftcloud shot one last glance over her shoulder at the silver she-cat before trotting away.

"Wait." Swiftcloud paused at the voice's command, looking over her shoulder once more. Mistyleaf stood, sweeping her tail nervously as she walked over to the other she-cat's side. "I'm going with you. It'll be easier to bring back more if there's two of us."

Swiftcloud smiled gratefully at her friend, nuzzling her cheek against hers. Together, the two she-cats headed for the exit.

"Oh, Swiftcloud!" Chicorynose meowed as they passed. Mistyleaf kept walking while Swiftcloud paused to speak with the deputy, wiggling her nubby tail slightly. Rabbitstorm was there as well, looking much better than he had before. He seemed to be strong again, ready to serve his clan in this time of need.

"I'm glad to see you're up and about," Chicorynose remarked, raising her tail. "I'd like you to lead a hunting patrol to Rabbit Gorge and see what you can find. Rabbitstorm's already offered to join."

"I'm sorry, I'd love to, but... there's something more important I have to take care of."

Chicorynose looked shocked, narrowing her eyes in slight annoyance. "More important than feeding your clan?"

Swiftcloud swallowed back a lump in her throat, willing the guilt away that threatened to take hold of her. "Yes. I'm going to Twolegplace to-"

"Twolegplace?! Oh, Swiftcloud, you aren't-"

"Listen," Swiftcloud hissed impatiently, stopping the deputy from

interrupting her. Her eyes widened in surprise at herself. "I..I'm sorry. I didn't mean to snap. It's-it's just- Mistyleaf and I *have* to go there. The medicine cats need catmint to heal the sick. But we think the only place left to find it is in Twolegplace. So...yes. This is more important than hunting for the clan. But we'll be back soon. I promise."

Chicorynose swished her tail thoughtfully, eyeing her old apprentice for a heartbeat. "Well then," she murmured, "in that case, I'd better come with you."

"What..?"

"You'll need an extra cat to bring more catmint back. Plus having another warrior with you would be safer. You never know what danger may be lurking in this harsh time of Leaf-bare."

"But what about the clan?" Swiftcloud wondered.

"I'll ask Tigerfang to take over in my absence. Grassclan will be in good paws while we're away, I can assure. And when we return they'll be even better off."

"Hold on," Rabbitstorm interjected. "Am I supposed to just stand here and listen to you mollies plan this crazy expedition and not do anything? I'm not letting you go off with my sister to who knows where. If Mistyleaf is going, then so am I."

"We need you to stay here, Rabbitstorm," Chicorynose insisted.

"I'm needed with my kin. Frostfeather, Jaybird and the kits are all sick now. I can't let anything happen to Mistyleaf as well. And if I can do anything to help the rest of my family, then I will. Forgive me, but I'm coming, with or without your permission."

Chicorynose sighed. "Fine. Let me go talk to Tigerfang and Whitestar, before any other cats decide to jump on this catmint patrol." Without another word the deputy turned, disappearing into Tall Stone. A couple moments later she reemerged, bounding over to the bramble barrier. "C'mon slow-slugs, no time to waste." Swiftcloud brightened at the deputy's remark, smiling and racing

after her with Rabbitstorm right behind. Mistyleaf was waiting for them by the camp's entrance, slipping through the tunnel and leading the way down the hill. While racing across the meadow, Swiftcloud sped past, taking the lead. She knew exactly which ways to go, and had a pretty good idea of what gardens to check out first. *Starclan, please let there be catmint waiting for us in Twolegplace.* Swiftcloud took her patrol back to her old territory; the neighborhood where she grew up. Her intent was to find one of her old friends if it were possible. Hopefully someone like Gem, or a cat with lot of connections. A cat like...

"Max!" Swiftcloud trilled, bounding ahead towards a Twoleg fence, hidden behind a shrub. Max-the wildest looking cat she'd ever met-was on the other side, sunbathing in a dry spot beneath a tree in the yard. Swiftcloud slipped through a hole in the fence, walking towards her friend. It was now that she noticed a second cat beside him. This cat looked just as wild as Max did, if not a little more. Her ears were large and rounded at the tips rather than pointed, her nose wide. The cat's tail seemed half the length of a normal cat's, but not a nub like Swiftcloud's. And their limbs were long, powerful looking. The most striking feature on the cat was her white coat, spotted with pale gray dots. Swiftcloud figured this cat was the same breed as Max, and probably had the same pelt condition as Rosebloom.

"Swiftpaw?" Max perked up as he noticed his old friend in his yard. He stood, giving his pelt a good shake. "It's been moons! How have you been? Looks like you've gotten taller. Although you're looking thinner than you were in the spring."

"It's complicated. Uh, but I was made a warrior in Leaf-fall! My name is Swiftcloud now. Shadowpaw's been named Shadowfang," Swiftcloud responded with a half smile.

"No kidding? Well congrats. So, what brings you to my garden? I see you've brought some friends. Though it doesn't seem like Shadowfang is with them."

"Those are my clanmates Rabbitstorm, Mistyleaf, and Chicorynose. We're here looking for catmint."

"Catmint?"

"Catnip," Mistyleaf chimed as she bounded over to stand by Swiftcloud. The others soon followed. "I think you kittypets know the herb as catnip."

"Ooh. Well, you won't find that here I'm afraid. Actually, I don't think any of the gardens in our neighborhood have it. But Ruby might know where to find some."

"Who's Ruby?" Rabbitstorm asked.

"That'd be me," meowed the wild looking white she-cat, standing up. Swiftcloud's clanmates bristled at the sight of her. "My mate is correct. I do know a place where catnip grows. A neighbor of mine has it back where I live. Luckily, my neighborhood is just around the corner. I could take you there if you'd like."

"Please. We need those herbs to heal the sick of our clan. The sooner we can get some, the better," Swiftcloud decided to explain. If she made things more urgent, then maybe they would be able to find the catmint quickly.

"In that case, we'd better hurry," Max decided.

Chapter 42

With the guidance of Ruby, Swiftcloud and her patrol made their way through the Twolegplace. They weaved inbetween the rows and rows of dens, avoiding sleeping monsters and Twolegs playing out in the snow. Anxiety prickled Swiftcloud's pelt the further on they ventured. She fretted that this mission might be a failure. If the plants in the meadow had all died off, why wouldn't the ones in Twolegplace do the same?
Eventually Ruby slowed her pace, pausing in front of a particularly large Twoleg's den. Within the backyard was a smaller see-through den. It appeared to be entirely made out of windows, glass was what the material was called, Swiftcloud recollected.

"Look!" Mistyleaf pointed at the structure with her tail, excitement radiating from her pelt. "There's plants in there. Look how lush and green they are!"

"That place is called a Green House," Ruby informed the clan cats. "Housefolk use them to grow plants and herbs year round. I believe you'll find what you'll need in there."

"But how are we going to get inside to look?" Rabbitstorm questioned. He sounded doubtful that they'd be able to do so at all. Ruby simply tilted her head, prompting the other cats to follow. The five other cats followed the large molly over the fence, landing in the fresh snow on the other side.

"We will ask for a favor," Ruby explained at last. The clan patrol exchanged confused looks. "Wait here, I'll be right back." With a dash, Ruby cleared halfway across the yard in a single bound. She galloped, stopping in front of the Twoleg den. She let out a mighty yowl, summoning some attention from inside. Immediately Swiftcloud panicked.

"Hide!" Chicorynose commanded the patrol, ducking into a bush by the edge of the fence. Her clanmates did the same, although Max waited just outside. Through the shrubbery, Swiftcloud could see a

Twoleg emerging from the den. From behind it, two kittypets strolled into view, happy as could be. Once its pets were outside, the the creature turned and lumbered back into its lair, the door swinging shut behind it. When she was sure the coast was clear, Swiftcloud took the first brave steps out from hiding and towards the strangers.
The kittypets appeared well groomed, with wet pink noses and bright eyes. Their fur was glossy, and their bodies plump. So different from the looks she was used to cats having. As she passed by the Green House, Swiftcloud caught a glimpse of her reflection in the glass. She resisted the urge to wince at the sight. In comparison to the kittypets, she looked terrible. *I look...I look like a wild cat,* she realized. Now she understood why house cats typically shyed away from strays. Especially those from the clans. To a peaceful kittypet she must look dangerous with her thin frame, tired eyes, and battle scars.
When Swiftcloud finally came to a stop beside Ruby, one of the kittypets began backing away. His brown and white pelt bristled, his fat belly dragged against the snowy ground. He seemed scared, annoyed even. The other kittypet, however, remained calm. The molly's thick tail was high in the air, her focus fixed on Swiftcloud. She was curious. Swiftcloud was curious about her as well. The she-cat had brown and white fur with rich dark swirling stripes. Thick framed and chubby, the she-cat looked to be in perfect health. Her face was broad with chubby cheeks, her ears round. And her eyes glowed yellow in the sunlight, filled with kindness. Around her neck was a green collar, with pebbles lining it that twinkled like stars. For a heartbeat, Swiftcloud wondered if the kittypet was a show cat. Or a cat who was "bred" to produce them.

"Hey there, Ruby," the molly spoke at last. "You called?"

"I did," Ruby agreed, lowering her head so she was at a more equal level with her friend. "I have some cats here who need some help."

"Oh yeah?" The kittypet promted, shifting her focus from Ruby back onto Swiftcloud. "What can I do for you?"
Swiftcloud blinked, turning around for a moment. She waved a paw, motioning for her clanmates to come stand beside her. Apprehensively, the rest of her patrol emerged from hiding,

padding over to stand with Swiftcloud.

"Aw hell, not more of em," griped the kittypet tom with ears flattening.

"Pipe down, Louie, they're not going to hurt us," the molly hissed at her denmate before giving her attention back to the clan cats. "Are you?"

"Not if you cooperate," Rabbitstorm grumbled with a tail flick. Mistyleaf gave him a disapproving shove.

"You have our word, no clan cat will bring either of you harm," Chicorynose promised after fixing Rabbitstorm with a glare.

The kittypet molly smiled "See?"

"Just get em to tell you what they want so they can go," the fat tom griped. The molly rolled her eyes.

"My apologies for my mate. Fat Louie doesn't really like strangers. Or, well, anyone for that matter. Sometimes not even me," she giggled although there was a twinge of sadness in her voice, "Anyways. Ruby says you're looking for a favor?"

"Yes," Mistyleaf stepped up. "We desperately need an herb for our clan. Many are sick, and some have even died. Obtaining these leaves will save many lives."

"We'd like to ask if you'd be kind enough to let us into your Green House to look for catnip. We see that you have many plants in there. And Ruby says you may have what we're looking for," Swiftcloud added with Mistyleaf nodding along agreeingly. Imminently, Fat Louie jumped to his paws.

"Ooh no," he growled, marching forward. "We are *not* letting a bunch of flea-ridden strays into our housefolk's garden den! We don't know if we can trust them, Tabitha. And even if we can, why would we? They're wild cats. They eat kits and kill each other for sport. Why should we give a sniff if the whole lot of them die?"

"Hey!" Rabbitstorm snapped, muscles bunching. Chicorynose and

Mistyleaf flanked him on both sides, preventing him from bursting forward.

"You misunderstand our way of life," Swiftcloud decided to try reasoning with the kittypets. After all, she used to be one too. Surely it couldn't be hard to convince them that the clan cats weren't so bad. "We care very deeply for our clanmates. Clan cats do everything for one another, to ensure we all survive. We fight, hunt, and care for every cat in our ranks. From the smallest kit, to the most decrepit elder. Coming here to ask for help proves that. We go to great lengths to save our friends, our family, our home."

"And why should we listen to you?" Fat Louie snorted.

"Because I used to be just like you two."

"Ignorant?" Tabitha joked.

"No." Swiftcloud shook her head. "I used to be a house cat. Almost a year ago now."

Tabitha gasped, her pupils growing wide. "Really? And you've survived this long? That's pretty cool."

Swiftcloud smiled. She was glad to see at least one of the kittypets was warming up to her and her clanmates a little. "It is. And I never would've survived this long without my clan. Throughout the moons, Grassclan has taught me and suppoted me with everything. They'd do anything for me. And I'd give everything for them. It was Mistyleaf and I's idea to come to Twolegplace today, to look for the herbs we need to cure our sick. That has to account for something. Please don't let us leave empty pawed."

Tabitha's eyes watered a little. She turned to Fat Louie before turning back to the clan patrol. "Ok, you've convinced me. I'll let you into our Green House."

"Like hell you will!" Fat Louie spat, grabbing Tabitha by the collar. With a mighty tug he dragged her backwards, effectively choking her. The tabby and white molly gagged, paws scraping against the icy ground. Her toes spread for her claws to unsheathe and ground

her, but nothing slid out from the slits in her paws. Helplessly Tabitha was pulled across the yard like prey. Swiftcloud's muscles buncued as she readied herself to spring to the kittypet's aid. She couldn't stand by and watch this abuse.

"Let go of her!" Rabbitstorm shot forward suddenly, leaping onto Fat Louie's back. The fat brown and white kittypet collapsed under the other tom's weight, yet still refused to let Tabitha go. Despite appearing out of shape, Louie turned out to be quite strong. And as persistent as a badger. No matter how passively Rabbitstorm tried to get hin to let go of Tabitha's collar, the spoiled tom refused. And so, Rabbitstorm was left resorting to violence. After giving his muzzle a scratch, Rabbitstorm was finally able to free the kittypet she-cat. Fat Louie jumped back, nose scrunched up with pain. Mistyleaf ran to Tabitha, herding her a fox-length away so she could be examined.

"Breathe deep," the medicine cat instructed as the other molly let out a few small coughs. She touched her nose to Tabitha's neck, looking for signs of tearing on the skin.

"What's wrong with you? Don't you know how to treat a she-cat?" Rabbitstorm snarled. Fat Louie grumbled under his breath, touching a white paw to his bleeding snout. He gave it a lick, trying to clear the liquid away. Fat Louie then waddled off to sulk, waiting for his Twoleg to let him inside through the door he came from. Rabbitstorm snorted with distaste, turning to Mistyleaf and Tabitha.

"Are you alright?" He asked the kittypet, voice surprisingly gentle. He nosed her, giving the molly a look over himself. Tabitha blinked, a small smile appearing on her face.

"I'm just a little winded," she responded.

"She'll be fine," Mistyleaf assured.

"Is this the first time he's done something like this?" Rabbitstorm asked seriously.

Tabitha's smile faultered, her expression revealing the truth about her treatment. "It's alright." she blinked away her sadness, "He loves

me. I know he does. Louie doesn't do things like that to cause harm..its because he cares. He was trying to protect me from all of you."

"Clearly it's not us you need protection from. You deserve to be treated with kindness. I'd never sit around and let like that happen to any cat. Especially my own mate."

"Well, thank you for the concern. You're...you're very kind." Tabitha ducked her head shyly.
Rabbitstorm purred a very tiny purr. It made Swiftcloud's heart feel light. It was the first time Rabbitstorm had acted like himself since Heatherwing's death. And with a kittypet no less? *How things have changed!*
"Come with me," Tabitha stood up, shaking snow from her pelt. "I'll let you into the Green House."

"Even after all that?" Chicorynose prompted, raising a brow. Tabitha gave a firm nod.

"I don't care what Louie wants right now. You cats need help. And I'm going to let you take as much of the catnip as you need."
The clan patrol exchanged excited trills, eagerness prickling among them.
"But," Tabitha interrupted. "I'm only going to do this on one condition."

"And what's that?" Chicorynose asked. Tabitha turned to Swiftcloud.

"I'm very curious about the life you've led. I'd like to hear your story."

Swiftcloud blinked, pelt growing hot. She didn't expect the spotlight to suddenly be shifted onto her. But if telling her tale could help save the clan, then she'd say anything to get into that Green House.

With a nod, Swiftcloud began. "Over a year ago, I was born as a kittypet -a house cat. I was raised to become a show cat, like my mother and father, and eventually my littermates. But I wasn't cut out for that life. At almost three moons old I was given to a new housefolk, to live a normal house cat's life. But even then I wasn't

satisfied. I began to dream of freedom, of a place that would give me that which I desired. At six moons I listened to those dreams and wandered to the meadow. There, I fought a wild cat- a tom that would eventually become my mate. And afterwards, I met his clanmates, and his leader. They told me all about the life of a clan cat, and I eventually settled on the idea of joining them. So, I changed my name, abandoned my collar and home, and left to live in Grassclan. I trained very hard for several moons, and fought in a few battles. And finally, I was named a warrior. I was named Swiftcloud, and finally found who I truly am."

"What was your name before?" Tabitha asked with intrigue. Swiftcloud glanced at each of her clanmates. She'd never told any clan cat her birth name before. When she'd joined them, she had changed it to the one she had been called in her dreams.

"I was born Hana. Then I became Swift. Now I am Swiftcloud, Hunter and Spy of Grassclan."

Tabitha let out a trill, her eyes sparkling. "Such an interesting life. What a fun character you are. Alright, a promise is a promise. Follow me I've kept you all waiting long enough."

Mistyleaf sighed with relief. Chicorynose purred with excitement. And Rabbitstorm moved to stand at Tabitha's side.

"Lead the way," he requested, earning a giggle from the molly. Tabitha padded through the snow, creating a path for the other cats to follow. For a heartbeat, she paused by the Green House's door. Her perfectly white paws disappeared under the snow, her body crouched and her rear wiggling. Max corralled the clan cats back, giving the other kittypet space to work. Swiftcloud observed Tabitha as she eventually pried open the door, just enough so that she could squeeze through. She slipped inside the den, waiting on the other side for the others to follow. Mistyleaf went in first, followed by Swiftcloud, Rabbitstorm, Chicorynose, Max, and finally Ruby.
Single file, the group padded through the glass den. The air in there was hot, humid; a major difference from the atmosphere outside. All around them were plants of all sizes and vibrancies. Exotic plants and familiar alike decorated the space, creating a powerful

almost forest-like fragrance. Most of the cats got the oppurtunity to gawk about the sight. Mistyleaf, however, retained her sharp focus. Her jaws were parted slightly to taste the air for the herb she needed. Her delicate nose twitched as she seemed to catch onto the trail.

"This way," she mewed, taking the lead. Swiftcloud pulled ahead to walk with her, keeping an eye out for the herbs. Near the back of the den, in a special patch, was an abundance of catmint. The smell emanating from them was enough to make a cat's mouth water. Mistyleaf trilled out happily, delicately leaping into the center of the herb patch.

"This'll be enough to treat every cat in Grassclan!" Swiftcloud cheered.

"Twice over," Mistyleaf agreed. She carefully snatched up a few catnip stems, carrying them out of the patch with her. "How much are we allowed to take?"

"As much as you want. My housefolks grow this stuff for Louie and I to use to relax. I hadn't realized it could be used to cure sickness, too."

"Only greencough," Mistyleaf elaborated. "Would we be allowed to come collect more at a future time? The amount we take today will be an excellent start towards a path of recovery. But a lot of the sick are in critical condition. They'll need many doses of catmint to be cured."

Tabitha beamed. "Yes. In fact, I insist you come back for more! I'd be sad if I never got to see you all again. This will be a great excuse for you to come and visit."

Mistyleaf purred gratefully. She instructed each of her clanmates to tip-toe into the herb patch to pick as many stems as they could carry. When the patrol was packed heavy with herbs, the cats made their way back to the front of the den. Before exiting though, Mistyleaf paused once more. Her nose twitched, green eyes twinkling.

"Tabitha, would it be alright if I collected some of that lavander over there as well? It will help to rid the stench of illness from our dens, and to treat fevers," she mewed after putting down her herbs.

"Oh sure," Tabitha agreed. "Whatever you need, it's yours. They're only plants, after all, they'll grow back." Mistyleaf once again let out a grateful purr. She padded over and picked a few of the flower stems, adding them to her bundle of catmint. She tied it all together with a stray vine from one of the other plants surrounding them before picking up her herbs again. Mission completed, the cats made their way back out into the cold. The frigide air outside of the Green House felt more bitter when the cats emerged into the open again. They'd adjusted to the Greeleaf warm climate, and hardly minded the humidity. Now the moisture has turned to ice particles on their fur.

Swiftcloud rested her herbs by her paws. She gave her pelt a shake and began to tremble a little. "We'd better hurry home before we all catch a chill."

Chicorynose let out an agreeing grunt. She dipped her head respectfully to the kittypet. "Thank you for everything, Tabitha. Grassclan will be forever grateful for this. If you should ever need anything, don't hesitate to ask."

Tabitha purred loudly, brushing her side against Chicorynose's in a friendly manner. "Farewell new clan friends. I'll see you again soon!" She bumped her head against Rabbitstorm's gently, looking into his eyes for a heartbeat.

"We look forward to our next visit. May the winds be with you." Mistyleaf touched her nose to Tabitha's.

"And-...what do you clan cats say in response to that?" The curious kittypet asked.

"We say 'And may Starclan light your path.' We like to bless each other with the guidance of our warrior ancestors," explained Swiftcloud.

Tabthia nodded along enthusiastically. "I see. Well then, may

Starclan light your path!"
The Grassclan patrol let out a collective *mrrow* of amusement. After each cat touched noses with Tabitha one last time, Ruby took the lead, guiding the warriors back to Max's house. After one last farewell to Max and Ruby, Swiftcloud led the patrol the rest of the way back to the Land's Star; eager to bring something good news to the clan.

Chapter 43

Only two days passed when the clan needed herbs again. Swiftcloud and Rabbitstorm travelled along the snowy path, led only by Ruby, back to through the Twolegplace. They paused at the fence by the large Twoleg's den, looking to their guide as they prepared to jump over.

"I shall wait for you right here. Please try not to take too long, it's very cold today," Ruby meowed, seating herself by the Twoleg fence. Swiftcloud and Rabbitstorm gave her an agreeing nod, leaping into the yard on the other side. Tabitha was already there, patiently waiting for them outside by the door. Fat Louie was also present, though he didn't appear as cheerful as his mate.

"Oh no. Not them again!" He griped. His expression was sour as he glanced from the Grassclan warriors to his mate and back.

"There you are!" Tabitha bounded towards the clan cats. She completely ignored Fat Louie's remark. "I've been waiting for you. I was worried you wouldn't come back."

"We told you we would. A warrior's word is their bond," Rabbitstorm responsed with his tail raised in greetings.

"I didn't mean any offense by that remark," Tabitha insisted,"it's just that I never know when you're coming back. For all I know, I could be waiting seasons to see you all again."

"Well, I can garuntee we'll never stay away that long," Swiftcloud promised, touching her nose to the other molly's assuringly.

Tabitha purred, turning to press her side into Rabbitstorm's. She didn't stick to the topic of their discussion anymore, now that her favorite cat was here to dote on. "Brr. It's so bitter outside today, don't you think?"

Rabbitstorm began to lick his chest fur, avoiding Tabitha's sunshine

yellow gaze. "I hadn't really noticed," he mumbled.

"I bet it's because you have all that long fur, hm? No cold can get through that handsome pelt of yours, I'm sure." Tabitha nudged him. It was so obvious that she wanted the tom's attention. Probably in more ways than one. Swiftcloud thought it was cute. Rabbitstorm shuffled his paws around in the snow, looking at them as if he suddenly found them fascinating. Swiftcloud resisted the purr of amusement that wanted to rise in her throat. She could tell just how flustered her friend was by how he was behaving. Tabitha was the only cat who could push his buttons this way, besides Heatherwing. If fate would have allowed it, Swiftcloud could have seen the pair becoming mates some day. But they came from two different worlds, and lived too far to maintain any sort of bond. Besides, Tabitha had Fat Louie as her mate already, despite how much of a fox-heart he'd previously shown himself to be. And despite how flirty and flustered he'd get, Swiftcloud doubted that Rabbitstorm was ready to move on from Heatherwing yet. It was still too soon since her passing.

"C'mon 'handsome' let's get that catmint," Swiftcloud teased, ignoring the memories of the deceased molly her mind tried to hold. Rabbitstorm perked up right away to glare at her, though a hint of mischief was noted in his expression.

"Haha, funny." He rolled his eyes, bounding ahead with Tabitha right beside him. Swiftcloud purred, falling in step with her companions. From behind, she could feel judgemental eyes upon them. Swiveling her ears back, Swiftcloud could hear an extra set of paws shuffling through the snow. She paused just outside the Green House door.

"You guys go ahead. I think I'll wait outside this time. Tabitha, can you bring a bundle of herbs for me please?"

Tabitha trilled, leaning herself against Rabbitstorm. "Sure!" Though her words were addressed to Swiftcloud, her attention was still placed on the lynx point tom next to her. Tabitha batted her eyes at him dreamily before following Rabbitstorm into the den. Swiftcloud was left outside alone and ignored. She watched the pair slip away into the tamed undergrowth before turning herself around. Her eyes

narrowed as Fat Louie appeared before her.

"Can I help you with something?" Swiftcloud asked the fat tom, not disguising the distrust she had for him.

"Yeah. You can help me by getting your mangy hides off my territory," Louie hissed. "Y'know you're all Tabitha's talked about since you came by the other day? It's always 'Swiftcloud' this. And 'wild cats' that. It's driving me batty! And if I have to listen to her gush one more heartbeat about 'Wabbitstorm～' I'm going to claw my own ears off."

"Is there really a problem with that?" Swiftcloud prompted. "Surely you'd want Tabitha to be happy? To have friends?"

"Tabitha doesn't need any cat but me. She's been fine the past six moons, with just her and I. And she'll be perfectly happy when you're gone! You're ruining everything we've planned for. Everything we've been brought together for."

Swiftcloud tilted her head, unsure of what Louie was referring to. "And what would that be?" She asked.

"To have kits, of course. Tabitha and I are supposed to have a few litters of kits for our housefolks."
So that was the reason why Tabitha was so open to flirting with a tom that wasn't her mate. She wasn't in love with Fat Louie at all. They'd been made to be mates by their Twolegs. Tabitha didn't have a choice. Swiftcloud resisted the urge to cringe at the realization. She'd only ever known of something like this happening with show cats; like her parents. Swiftcloud's parents had been coupled together to produce award winning kittens. Luckily, the two of them had found true love for each other over time. But Swiftcloud couldn't see that being the case with Tabitha and Louie. Especially when Tabitha was so infatuated with Rabbitstorm. *What a miserable life she'll lead*, Swiftcloud thought bitterly.

"You being here's putting too many ideas into that molly's head. She's thinkin about being a clan cat, yknow," Fat Louie added, looking disgusted.
She'd definitely be happier if she was, Swiftcloud wanted to say. But

she held her tongue, her nubby tail wiggling in agitation.
"So why don't you all just stay away? Go home to your fields or something. Keep out of housefolk neighborhoods. And especially our territory." Fat Louie took a few steps closer, his nose only a mouse-whisker away from Swiftcloud's. From this distance she could see the scratches Rabbitstorm had left on the tom's muzzle. "I heard your story, yknow. You made your choice to be one of those wild cats. Let Tabitha stay where she belongs; don't force her to make the same decision as you did."

"Nobody is forcing her to choose. Tabitha is her own cat. She can decide to follow whatever path she pleases. You have no right to keep her from her happiness."

Fat Louie drew his lips back in a snarl. "*I* make her happy. *We* are happy. You're just too blinded by your wild lifestyle to see it. Maybe you had been a house cat before, but that time has passed. You've forgotten what it's like. You can't possibly begin to understand anything about our relationship. I'll warn you one last time; stay away from our territory, or else."

"Or else what? You'll drive us away? Sick you Twolegs on us?"

"I'll do something I'd rather not. I'll hurt Tabitha. I'll make sure our housefolks see her injuries. And when they do, they'll never let her outside again. She's declawed, yknow. There'll be no way for her to defend herself."

"That absurd," Swiftcloud growled, "there's no need to take things that far. We visit your territory to gather catmint for our sick. Once the greencough has been eliminated from our clan, we won't need to come around anymore. We'll be gone for good within the next moon or so. Besides, the clan can't handle any new mouthes to feed right now." Swiftcloud was careful with how she worded things, knowing that whatever she'd say would make its way to Tabitha through Fat Louie. There was no need to give him more ammunition to use to try and prevent his mate from running away to the clans.

Louie grunted in response, "I'll believe it when I see it... Heed my warning, wild cat." With that, the fat tom stalked off, giving a

grumble as he went. *Nasty old badger*, Swiftcloud thought sourly, turning to meet with her clanmates inside the Green House.

A quarter moon went by. Swiftcloud had returned for another needed round of herbs. A new set of cats had joined this patrol, cats she was eager to introduce to her new kittypet friend.

"I can't believe we're so far in Twolegplace!" Frostfeather exclaimed as they entered Tabitha's yard from the fence. She shook out her pelt as snow sprayed over her from the impact of her landing.

"I think it's awesome," Tulippaw chimed, having regained her spunk after recovering from greencough. "I know aunt Whitestar approved of us coming here. But crossing into unknown territory makes me feel like a rebel spy."

"Are you interested in being a Spy?" Swiftcloud wondered aloud. She'd be thrilled if her apprentice wound up following in her pawsteps. And even if she didn't, she was glad to give the young cat a taste of what the job may intell. Ambereye would probably approve as well.
Tulippaw gave an unsure shrug, bristling slightly as she noticed the door to the Twolegs' den swing open. Swiftcloud followed her apprentice's gaze. Tabitha came bounding over the moment she noticed the clan cats waiting for her. She waved her tail in greetings, coming to a stop in front of them. Disappointment momentarily took over her expression, a look Swiftcloud figured was for Rabbitstorm's sake. He hadn't been assigned to join the herb patrol this time, even though he insisted.

"I see you've brought some new faces," Tabitha remarked to Swiftcloud, glancing at the strange she-cats.

"Hi there!" Frostfeather beamed. "I'm Frostfeather!! Gee, you sure smell funny," the silver and white tabby mewed, giving Tabitha a sniff. Swiftcloud giggled, reminded of the time she'd first met Frostfeather. She'd reacted the same way then, too.

"Well, so do you! Actually, you kinda smell like some other clan friends I have," Tabitha noted.

"You must be talking about Rabbitstorm and Mistyleaf, right? They're my littermates!"

Tabitha gasped happily. "You're Rabbitstorm's other sister?? How is he? Has he mentioned me at all? I miss him so much!"

Frostfeather let out a trill of amusement.

"Hey!" Tulippaw caterwauled. "I thought we came here to pick up catmint, not to gossip like elders."

"Tulippaw's right," Swiftcloud agreed. Across the way, she could see Fat Louie watching them through a window. His eyes were narrowed, teeth exposed. Swiftcloud felt a little anxious at the sight. She didn't want to distract Tabitha for long in fear for the kittypet's safety. But at the same time, she was feeling a bit spiteful. Louie wanted to prevent Tabitha from becoming too enthralled in clan cat culture. But that didn't mean Swiftcloud couldn't teach her a thing or two about survival.
"Tulippaw, I'd like to assign you to a special task," she mewed. "I know you think herb gathering is boring. So, as compromise for coming along, I'll let you hang out here and play with Tabitha. Maybe you can show off your talented hunting skills, hm?"

Tulippaw perked up at the suggestion, an excited grin forming on her face. "That'll be fun! Hey, hey Tabitha, have you ever tried catching a mouse?"

Tabitha shook her head looking curious. "No, never. I wish I could though."

Tulippaw's grin widened, "then stick with me, I'll teach you everything you need to know."

Swiftcloud and Frostfeather let out a *mrrow* of laughter, letting the two excited cats play while they went and gathered up everything they needed. Swiftcloud felt relieved, having someone there to protect Tabitha during their visit. It felt good to do right by her. It was the least the clan could do for her generosity. And for potentially breaking ger heart in the near future.

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After a moon and half of continuous visits to the Twolegplace, the need for catmint had been completely fulfilled. Today would be the final visit to Tabitha's den, to tell her the good news, and to say farewell for good. It was a bittersweet day for everyone. But it was one they all knew would come. Soon, life would return to normal. With every cat well again, Grassclan could get back to business as usual. And Tabitha could go back to living the life that had been chosen for her by the Twolegs.

"Swiftcloud, Frostfeather, Mistyleaf, Chicorynose!" Tabitha cheered as she saw the warriors approach. Her eyes became particularly sparkly when she looked towards the final cat in their patrol. "Rabbitstorm!" The round tabby launched herself at the tom, slamming him into the padded ground below. They slid a mouse-length, leaving an indent the snow. Tabitha sat on top of Rabbitstorm, beaming down at him.

"Get off me you great big furball!" Rabbitstorm meowed, though there was laughter laced within his tone.

Tabitha smiled that much brighter, rubbing her cheek against his. "I missed you all so much."

"It's only been a few days." Chicorynose purred with amusement. Tabitha sat up, allowing Rabbitstorm to slip free from her grip. She lifted a paw to lick, casually running it over one of her ears.

"I know, but it's always so hard when you have to go away."

"Hey Tabitha, we have something amazing to tell you," Swiftcloud informed the kittypet molly. Tabitha perked up. "The last of our clanmates has been confirmed well again!"

"Really? Oh, that's fantastic!" Tabitha cheered.

"Grassclan's grown strong thanks to you," Chicorynose added. "We're very grateful for the aid you've provided, Tabitha. Thank you... I know our visiting is payment enough for your assistance. But, I wish there was something more we could do in return for your

charity."

Tabitha shuffled her paws. "There's only one thing I'd ask for, if I could. I'd love to be taken back to Grassclan with all of you... But I know I wouldn't do well in the wild. I have no claws. I can't hunt or fight. I don't have much of a way to provide for a whole group of cats the way you can. And...I'm expecting kits."

"There's plenty of ways to hunt that don't always require claws," Swiftcloud pointed out, her bird catching technique standing out in her mind. "Plus in our clan, cats have partners. You'd always have somebody around to help you catch prey."

"And not every cat in the clan hunts for the rest," Rabbitstorm added. "There's cats who repair dens or help the medicine cats gather their herbs. And our queens tend to the entire clan, and their mental wellbeings "

"Really?" Tabitha was intrigued.

"Yeah!" Frostfeather chimed. "If you joined us, there would be plenty for you to help with. Besides we all really like you, you'd fit in with Grassclan perfectly."

Tabitha's eyed began to sparkle with hope. She smiled, chest puffing out excitedly.

"Hang on," Ruby interjected. "Surely you need to think this through. As much as I hate to agree with Fat Louie, its true you belong here. You aren't like these clan cats, Tabitha, please see reason."

"No I don't," Tabitha argued. "I don't belong here at all. In fact, I *hate* this place! I'm always so bored. There's nothing fun to do. And Louie doesn't care about me. He has no interest in what I talk about or in spending time with me. He hardly even reacted when I told him that I'm expecting. The most excitement that's come from my life has been from interacting with you, and with all the wild cats you've brought to visit me." Tabitha turned to address the Grassclan patrol. Tears began to well in her eyes, her voice was pleading. "I want to be warrior. I want crazy adventures, and friends that I can count on. I want my kits to be born wild and free in the meadow.

Not miserable and lonely in some dusty old den like I was. The only thing I want in return from you is a home. A *family*. Please, take me with you!"

"Well." Chicorynose twitched her whiskers. "Typically, this decision would be up to Whitestar. However, the clan could use fresh blood now that so many of our warriors have passed on. And you've proven yourself capable of loyalty to our clan. I see no reason why we shouldn't take you."
Tabitha's pelt fluffed with excitement.

"But be warned," Swiftcloud cut in. "Living as a clan cat is not all fun and games. There's danger everywhere. The cold seasons are harsh, and food will not be so readily available. There's predators; and the other clans can be vicious, too. Know that by coming with us, you're giving up comfort, warmth, certainty. For you and your kittens. Are you sure this is what you want?"

"All of that sounds pleasant, compared to the dull life I've had to lead. I'd rather die than stay here a moment longer. At least in the clan I'll know that I've truly lived. And I'll know that my kits are happy too."

Chicorynose beckoned the others with her tail. "Then come. We'll be off to the meadow at once. Whitestar will want to meet you. And we should probably move quickly, before Louie comes along to try and stop you."

Tabitha let out an excited trill, doing a little spin of joy. She bumped her head against Chicorynose's, purring. "Oh thank you, thank you, thank you!!"

"Well." Ruby stepped closer to her kittypet friend. Her purple-ish eyes narrowed down at the plump molly, her ears twitching. "I suppose, if there's no stopping you..." Without warning, the large she-cat snatched up Tabitha by the collar. She gave a few hard yanks, ripping it right off her friend's neck. Tabitha let out a surprised gasp, her fur standing on end. She stared down at her collar, which had been dropped by her paws. Tabitha looked up at Ruby with wide eyes. Ruby in turn lowered her head to touch noses with her. "Take care, Tabitha. And good luck out there."

Tabitha blinked and purred once more, licking her friend's muzzle. "Thank you," she whispered, stepping back. Chicorynose flicked an ear, beckoning the Grassclan patrol to come along.

"I'll lead the way," Swiftcloud offered, padding on ahead. The rest of her clanmates followed, Tabitha rushing over to join them. Ruby traveled with, eventually allowing the clan cats to move on without her. She watched as her friend and the rest of the Grassclan patrol disappeared over the horizon.

When they were back in familiar territory, Mistyleaf piped up from the back of the group. "Swiftcloud, could I speak with you for a few heartbeats?"
Swiftcloud turned, following her friend's request. The two she-cats hung back, while the rest of their clanmates continued ahead towards camp. They fell in step with one another, speaking softly.
"I wanted to let you know how grateful I am for the help you've provided these past couple of moons. Starclan knows how much of a pain it was to get Snowfrost to agree to allow you to assist. But I think if it weren't for you, Grassclan may have been suffering from greencough until Newleaf."

"I just did what any other cat would do," reasoned Swiftcloud.

"That's not true," Mistyleaf disagreed. "You've gone above and beyond what was expected. You let yourself go hungry so others could eat. Pushed yourself to keep going even though you were tired. You volunteered to help Snowfrost and I with your immunity. And you were the one to insist we look in Twolegplace for catmint. No other cat was able to do all that. And now, Grassclan is strong again. It's all because of you."
Swiftcloud felt herself flush beneath her pelt. Her head dipped bashfully to avoid Mistyleaf's gaze. She couldn't bring herself to believe that what she'd done was out of the ordinary. *I was only fulfilling my duty as a warrior.*
Mistyleaf moved to press herself against her friend's flank. She purred softly, drawing Swiftcloud's attention onto her with a flick of her thick tail.

"I knew you were important," she whispered. "I never realized how much of an impact you'd make, until now... I admire you so much,

Swiftcloud." Mistyleaf pressed herself against her companion further. "Maybe even more than that..."

Swiftcloud gulped. "More..?"

Mistyleaf nodded, "I suppose, well...It's taken me a long time to consider my feelings about you. I thought I just wanted to be friends, but... Stars, I can't hold back my affection for you anymore...! Swiftcloud...I-"
Swiftcloud suddenly curved around to stand in the medicine cat's path, interrupting her. She trembled slightly, but stood tall. Her eyes sparkled and heart fluttered as if butterflies had found their way into her chest. Mistyleaf blinked. Confusion showed in her pretty silver features. There was a silence that settled between the pair. What felt like eternity lasted only heartbeats. It was clear what Mistyleaf wanted to say. But Swiftcloud couldn't let her be the first to speak those words.

"I love you too," she finally confessed, moving to touch her muzzle against Mistyleaf's.
Mistyleaf's eyes began to water. She pressed her face to Swiftcloud's, her purr rising to a loud elated rumble. The she-cats nuzzled one another, shedding a couple of happy tears. After so many moons of pining, they could finally give into their desires and be together. Swiftcloud couldn't be happier. Now she could call both of her greatest loves her mates.
The two she-cats trotted on ahead, flank against flank, back to Grassclan's camp. They arrived just in time to make it to Tabitha's apprentice ceremony.

"Ah, there you are,"Whitestar meowed. "I was just about to make mention of you, Swiftcloud. I've assigned Chicorynose to be Tabitha's mentor. And I'd like to ask you to help as well. Having a cat from a similar background to teach her our way of life would be most beneficial. I hope you can handle training two apprentices."
Swiftcloud blinked, glancing from Mistyleaf back to Whitestar.

"I'll manage just fine. Thank you, Whitestar," she replied, padding over to the base of the Tall Stone. Chicorynose and Tabitha stood their waiting, the second of the pair turning to touch noses with Swiftcloud. At once, the clan broke out into cheers. Swiftcloud

basked in the excitement of it all. Of the energy in the air, and of the strength of her clanmates. Perhaps now everything could return to normal. And with it, perhaps Grassclan could live in peace. And maybe at last, Swiftcloud could indulge in life's simple pleasures.

Chapter 44

The full moon shone overhead, battling with the clouds for the right to show off it's brilliance. Swiftcloud stared up at it as she followed the line of her clanmates to the Gathering clearing. She felt a bit wary; painfully conscious that tonight may very well be the night Grassclan and Treeclan become enemies once more.

"This is so exciting!!" Tabitha whispered from behind Swiftcloud, a tremble in her mew. "I'm really interested in meeting all these different kinds of clan cats."

"I know, Tabitha," Swiftcloud purred a little, though her expression stayed serious. "Hopefully this gathering will be a good one. But with Leafbare fading, I have doubts that tonight will be very peaceful."

"How come?" The former kittypet tilted her head when Swiftcloud glanced back at her.

"Remember how I told you some of the other clans can be vicious? Well, Treeclan's had a problem with Grassclan for the past several moons. In fact... we've been at war."

"War?" Tabitha sounded surprised. "Why would another clan fight with ours when everyone's been sick?"

"They haven't. Whitestar managed to get Treeclan's leader to agree to a temporary truce. But that was to last until the worst of Leafbare passed..."

"Which means things might start getting heated again, I'm guessing?"
Swiftcloud nodded slightly.
Tabitha gulped. "Does.. does that mean I'll have to fight?"

"No, Tabitha. You've only been with Grassclan for a day now. You haven't been taught how to fight yet. Whitestar wouldn't send a new

apprentice into battle," Swiftcloud assured, which made her friend sigh with relief.

Up ahead, Whitestar's pace began to slow. The familiar hedges of the Gathering clearing came into view, marking the end of their long journey. Whitestar and Chicorynose led the clan into the open space, holding the line's formation long enough for the other clans to take notice of Grassclan's presence. Whitestar had insisted upon bringing a large group of cats to this Gathering. She wanted to prove to everyone that her clan was strong again. Swiftcloud hadn't known Whitestar to be a showoff. But Swiftcloud supposed it made sense to do so every once in a while. It was still Leafbare after all. Cats were hungrier than usual. Grassclan had to prove that they had enough cats left to defend their borders, in case anyone tried sneaking across to steal prey.
After the higher-ups were sure the rest of the Land's Star had gotten a good view of their clan. Grassclan's warriors were permitted to run off and mingle with the crowd. Swiftcloud did so eagerly, calling Tabitha and Tulippaw to her side. The apprentices excitedly followed her every pawstep, eager to meet new warriors they'd never met before.

"Swiftcloud!" That was Moonface who called from across the way. Swiftcloud turned and padded over to her friend, her apprentices at her heels. Moonface was looking much more well fed today, her belly starting to grow plump. Beside her stood a younger cat with a brilliant ginger pelt.

"Hey, Moonface." Swiftcloud touched noses with the other she-cat. "How are you? You're looking well."

"I'm great, thank you for asking. Life is turning out pretty swell! Blazestar recently made me a mentor," answered Moonface.

"Congratulations. I'm guessing this eager molly beside you is the lucky apprentice, hm?" Swiftcloud assumed, glancing at the ginger she-cat. She looked similar to Moonface's mate, Sunflower. Swiftcloud wondered if the two ginger cats were kin.

Moonface nodded, resting her tail on the young cat's shoulders. "This is Scarletpaw. Scarletpaw meet Swiftcloud of Grassclan. And

her apprentice. And..friend? I don't recall ever seeing you before, stranger. You don't smell much like any of the clans."

"Both are my apprentices," Swiftcloud answered. "The younger is Tulippaw. I forgot the two of you haven't met before. And the older molly is Tabitha. We've just taken her into our ranks. I'm teaching her about clan life, while Chicorynose handles the typical training stuff."

"Ooh, I see," Moonface responded. "You were a kittypet, then?" She asked Tabitha.

"Mhm. But now I'm apprentice! And a queen!!"

"That means you're expecting? What a coincidence. I'm expecting, too!" Moonface beamed, letting out an excited trill.

Swiftcloud ears perked instantly. "Wait, you're pregnant? That's amazing! No wonder why you look so good. I'm sure Sunflower's proud, huh?"

Moonface purred, love glowing in her eyes. "Oh he's ecstatic. He can't wait to meet our little ones. And honestly, neither can I. Motherhood is going to be wonderful. And I'm already getting good practice by taking care of Scarletpaw. She can be a pawful at times. But she listens when I tell her things, and picks up on lessons quickly."

"That's because Moonface is the best mentor ever!" Scarletpaw proclaimed with her head held high.

"No way, *my* mentor's the best. Swiftcloud saved the whole clan! She's a hero. She's the greatest warrior in the Land's Star," boasted Tulippaw. Swiftcloud ducked her head bashfully. She was honored that Tulippaw regarded her so highly. She hadn't acted that way with Ambereye. In some way, Swiftcloud felt pride in that. But in another, she felt bad. Tulippaw had always wanted Swiftcloud as her mentor. The circumstances which led them to become a learning pair were unideal, and grim. Ambereye hadn't even gotten the chance to earn Tulippaw's full respect. Meanwhile, Swiftcloud gained it immediately.

"Prove it!" Scarletpaw's mew cut into Swiftcloud's thoughts.

"I'll show you what Swiftcloud taught me!" Tulippaw declared, throwing herself at the other molly. The apprentices tussled playfully on the ground, kicking and swiping at each other with claws sheathed. The older she-cats let out a collective *mrrow* of laughter at the sight.
At once, the leaders began to yowl from Split Rock, signaling the start of the Gathering. The apprentices paused in their playfight, sitting upright together. Tulippaw prodded Scarletpaw in the side, leading her over to a group of other apprentices from the Land's Star who sat nearby.

"Let's sit over here," Moonface suggested, leading the other cats a bit closer to where a collection of queens had gather. Jaybird was here, along with Moonface's mother, Brightsky. There was also Breezeheart of Mountainclain, Richfur of Oceanclan, and Littlebird of Marshclan. Swiftcloud mewed a soft hello to each of the queens, settling herself between Moonface and Tabitha. Around them, more cats filled in closer to the Split Rock, their voices silent and their attentions drawn to the leaders above them.

"Let the Gathering begin!" Brightstar declared, her high pitched voice echoing through the clearing. "Blazestar, would you like to make tonight's first announcements?" She offered. Blazestar grunted in approval, tipping his head to the other leader in thanks. He stepped forward, raising his muzzle so his voice would carry clearly.

"Treeclan thrives this moon. Slowly, prey is returning to the forest. Our medicine cats expect an early Newleaf this year, which we are most excited about. In other news; Nightshade, Moonface, and Tigerlily are expecting. Moonface has decided to join the nursery as an official queen, while the others continue their warrior duties as normal. Finally; this evening we bring with us two new apprentices. Our warrior apprentice, Scarletpaw, and our new medicine cat apprentice, Sugarpaw."

Cats from all of the clans broke out into a crescendo of congratulatory mews. Swiftcloud joined in, yowling loud to show her friend her support. Moonface looked away, flustered, giggling

softly. Swiftcloud nudged her to gain back her attention. The two mollies smiled at one another then turned their gaze back onto the leaders.

Fogstar was the next cat to step up. "Mountainclan was blessed last moon, with new kits and new apprentices. I wish there was better news for me to share this night as well... But Starclan must keep balance. We cannot have the good, without the bad. And-- well, to stop beating around the bush; sadly, I must announce the passing of Bearclaw this past quarter moon. Hawkfern says it was peaceful. He was almost as old as I am, and so it was to be expected. Bearclaw was an excellent deputy, he shall be missed for many moons. As his successor, I have chosen Galecall. She's level headed and capable. I trust she will do a great job from here on out. That is all I have to report."
And with that, the old gray tom stepped back, leaving the floor open for the next leader.

Whitestar took this opportunity to speak. "Grassclan fares well this moon. Thanks to the quick thinking of one of our warriors, our clan was at last able to beat greencough. We are strong once more, and ready to take on any and all challenges. Furthermore, to strengthen our ranks--and our bloodlines--I have accepted an expecting kittypet into Grassclan. Chicorynose has been assigned as her mentor, along with Swiftcloud, who will be helping her adapt to our way of life as quickly as possible before her kits come."

"I'm glad to hear your clan has recovered, Whitestar," Blazestar cut in. "Treeclan once again thanks you for the aid you provided us a few moons back, when we were suffering from our own greencough outbreak. But that time has passed. Leafbare's hold on the Land's Star weakens, and so, our truce has come to an end. Expect hostility the next time one of your patrols comes along the Treeclan border."

"Can we not live in peace?" Whitestar prompted, swaying her tail. She seemed annoyed to have her turn interrupted. "Must we continue to fight over complicated situations which happened so long ago?"

"Border crossing is a long-standing issue, Whitestar. That will never change. Not unless those who commit this crime are properly

punished. Treeclan still intends on taking back the Forest Patch. Perhaps, if there is a distinct border, Grassclan will understand where not to tread."

"If you are so determined to create a distinct border, then why not surrender the forest past the Thunder Path entirely? Why fight so hard for territory your clan clearly does not need to survive? Does that area not also pose a threat to your warriors? I recall several instances of your clanmates dying due to crossing into the Forest Patch. Your son Flamepaw, for instance. Or your deputy's son, Skunkpaw, who was kitnapped by Twolegs. And what about you? I seem to recall a time when you had fallen victim to a monster on the Thunder Path yourself. Surely all this loss is not worth one small piece of forest."

Blazestar grit his teeth, his claws scraping against the boulder beneath him. The fur along his spine rose, and his tail lashed violently. "Don't you *dare* talk about those kits!" He spat. "Flamepaw's death was because of the negligence of his mentor. And Skunkpaw's disappeance was your clan's doing!"

"No it was not!" Swiftcloud yowled suddenly, jumping to her paws. She was sick of feeling guilty for something that was not her fault. She had warned Skunkpaw and his littermates to flee. It was his choice to ignore her, and wind up kitnapped. Swiftcloud lived through that shame, and had finally made peace with it. She couldn't bare to sit by idle and allow herself or her clan to be blamed for another cat's decisions.

"Swiftcloud's right!" Moonface suddenly called out. Her expression was serious, tail wagging anxiously. "Skunkpaw's disappearance is not Grassclan's fault!"
Swiftcloud looked at her friend in astonishment. She hadn't expected her to speak up. But she had been there when her brother was taken. Moonface knew the truth, just as her littermates did; just as Swiftcloud did. Swiftcloud wondered if Moonface or her littermates had ever told their clan what had occurred that day. Where they had been, how things escalated the way they had.

Blazestar looked angry at Moonface's outburst. He glared down at her coldly before returning his attention to his colleague. "I'm

through with these games, Whitestar. I will not argue over this any longer. Anymore persuading that can be done will be considered on the battlefield. And any decisions made will come as a conclusion of the war. Treeclan will no longer show you mercy."

"If that is your wish, then so be it," Whitestar declared.

"Yeah, let's fight!" Cheered one of Treeclan's young warriors, launching themselves at the nearest Grassclan cat. The cat this warrior had chosen to pounce on was Pansypaw, who was in no mood to be messed with. With the fury of a Lionclan warrior, the little spotted she-cat threw her opponent off herself then jumped on them in return. She pummeled the cat with her front paws, yowling. Swiftcloud saw Frostfeather watching on in horror. She must have been shocked that her usually well behaved apprentice was acting so violently. But Swiftcloud wasn't. She understood how the young molly must feel. She'd lost her father, Ryestep, in a border battle before she was even born. And now her mother and littermates were dead thanks to the greencough which Rosebloom had caught from Treeclan. Treeclan was responsible for taking all of her kin away. Pansypaw must not have been able to contain her hatred for them any longer.
Frostfeather soon grew tired of seeing her apprentice fight. She jumped in to pull her back, getting caught up in the crossfire. Another Treeclan warrior jumped into the fight, encouraging a few others to join.
Cats from around the clearing watched in outrage as Treeclan and Grassclan began to fight on this sacred night. And Starclan was not at all pleased.
Overhead, the clouds had won their clash with the moon, covering it's light and shrouding the Gathering clearing in darkness. At once, cats began to cry out, and those who fought froze, terrified of their ancestor's anger.

"This Gathering is over! Everyone return home," Wavestar caterwauled with a huff. "Can't even get a chance to speak at one of these cursed Gatherings anymore with you two around. It's lucky any cat's gotten to speak at all. For everyone's sake, settle your petty feud already," he growled to Whitestar and Blazestar before jumping from the Split Rock. Oceanclan gathered around him, their

judgemental eyes landing on the offending clans. Swiftcloud saw Moonface stare at one particular warrior. It was Hazestorm, a mutual friend of theirs. He was looking towards the silver and white molly with longing. Moonface held his gaze for a heartbeat then turned away from him. She excused herself to Swiftcloud and Tabitha then stood, disappearing into the crowd. *What was that all about?* Swiftcloud wondered as she rose to her paws.

"Come on, Tabitha. Let's go collect Tulippaw and head out of here."

"I must confess, I'm a little confused. What just happened..?" Tabitha asked.

"Our warrior ancestors are mad at us for fighting under the full moon. The Land's Star has a peaceful truce for this one night. We've broken it. So, we have to leave."

"I see," Tabitha mewed quietly, following her mentor towards the rest of the Grassclan patrol. Tulippaw came to meet them halfway. She had a few speckles of blood on one of her white paws. Swiftcloud shot her a questioning look, nubby tail wiggling.

"Scarletpaw attacked me. So, I ripped her ear!" Tulippaw grinned proudly. Swiftcloud simply shook her head and herded her apprentice over to join their clanmates for the journey home.

Chapter 45

At dawn, a meeting was called, mandatory for every cat to attend. Though many were tired from the Gathering in the previous evening, many more were eager to hear news.
"Cats of Grassclan. Now that we are strong again, it is time to show Treeclan what we're made of," Whitestar began, glancing around at all of her warriors and apprentices.
"To start, I think that it's time the clan's had some new apprentices. We still grieve the loss of Thistlepaw, Seedpaw, and Lilacpaw. But we must move forward. We must welcome forth the next generation of future warriors. Thornkit, Lightkit, step forward."
In place of their mother, Tigerfang walked their kits up to the front of the crowd. The pair looked proud; not a speck of anxiety could be caught in their features. Whitestar looked down at her litter with love. But right now she was a professional. She would praise her kits later. It was finally time to start their training. Thornkit and Lightkit were both seven moons old. Due to the greencough outbreak, their naming ceremony was postponed. But after that extra moon of waiting, their patience was about to be rewarded.

"You have survived the first seven moons of your lives. May Starclan guide your paws from this moment on." As tradition held, Whitestar lifted her muzzle to the sky to announce to Starclan; "From this day forward, until they have earned their warrior names, these apprentices shall be know as the following: Thornkit, from this day forward, you shall be known as Thornpaw. Shadowfang, I believe you are ready for your first apprentice. You've proven to be a cunning and brave warrior. I expect you to pass these fine traits on to Thornpaw in turn."
Shadowfang perked up in surprise. Clearly, he hadn't been aware of Whitestar's choice of mentor for her son. Swiftcloud couldn't be prouder of her mate. She nudged him, giving him an encouraging lick on the cheek. Shadowfang chuckled and flicked her ear with his tail, padding ahead to the front of the crowd. Thornpaw turned to greet him. He stood tall with his chest puffed, legs together uniformly. His head raised with pride, only lowering to touch noses

with his new mentor. Shadowfang tilted his head slightly. He lifted a paw, batting at his new apprentice playfully. Thornpaw broke from his serious stance, glancing up at the older tom confused.

Shadowfang smirked. "Lighten up, 'Paw. You and I are gonna have some fun."
Thornpaw began to grin excitedly. He followed Shadowfang back into the crowd, the pair choosing to sit by Tigerfang.

Whitestar watched the interaction fondly before continuing the ceremony. "And Lightkit, from this day forward you shall be known as Lightpaw. Cricketsong, it's been some time since you've trained an apprentice; you will be her mentor. Mold Lightpaw into the best warrior she can possibly be."
Cricketsong carefully picked her way over to Tall Stone. She gently touched noses with her niece, giving her a reassuring lick between the ears afterwards. Lightpaw smiled politely, following in step with her mentor back into the crowd. Swiftcloud approved of this mentor/apprentice pairing. Training her kin would do Cricketsong good. It would help take her mind off of her deceased kits. Starclan only knew how depressed she'd been since their passing.
With the ceremony completed, the clan began to caterwaul the new apprentices' names.

"Thornpaw! Lightpaw! Thornpaw! Lightpaw!"

Whitestar allowed the clan to cheer for a few more moments before waving her tail, commanding silence. "Now that we've gotten pleasantries out of the way, it's time we discussed our next order of business. For those who are unaware, last night at the Gathering, Blazestar called off our Leafbare truce. He has promised that his clan will be paying ours a visit very soon."

"So what are we going to do, Whitestar?" Asked Tulippaw.

"Attack first," Whitestar answered simply.

"Is that wise?" Tornface wondered. "We've barely just begun to recover from the harsher part of the season."

"You definitely have a point. But Grassclan will wind up in a fight

regardless of who makes the first strike," was the leader's response. "And I've no doubts that Treeclan's already plotting their next attack. There's no point in sitting around and waiting for them to make a move. If we act first, we have a greater chance at success."

"Is that why you've postponed the dawn patrol?" Questioned Ladybugbite.

"Yes," answered Whitestar.

"Do we have a plan, then?" Gingerstrike called out. Whitestar nodded in response, gesturing down to the clan's deputy with her tail for an explanation.

"We will be sending two patrols into the Forest Patch today," Chicorynose began, "one will advance into the woods, set new scent markers, and attack any Treeclan cats we come across. The second group will serve as back up, and hide in the trees."
At once, the clan broke out into a series of worried and outraged murmurs. Most seemed to be against this plan, looking visibly uncomfortable. Grassclan cats were used to fighting on solid ground, after all. Sitting in a tree felt like something unnatural to consider. Even when times were desperate.

"Us, climbing trees?" Pollenpaw gasped.

"What kind of cats do you think we are?" sneered Nectarpaw.

"The kind that obey orders," Chicorynose answered, fixing her nieces with a glare.

Swiftcloud glanced around at her clanmates, reflecting their collective anxieties. This was a strategy she hadn't been made aware of before. She hadn't been privy to join the discussion where this plan was constructed. If she had been, Swiftcloud might have spoken out against it, like the rest of her clanmates. But there was no point in doing so now. The decision had been made, and Whitestar was already leaping from Tall Stone to form the patrols. Swiftcloud was called over to join one of them.

"You will lead the second patrol," Grassclan's leader told her.

"You're the best jumper in the clan, and a good climber from what I saw at the Green Gathering. I trust you will set a good example for the others. Rabbitstorm, Frostfeather, Tigerfang, Sheeptail, Pansypaw, and Shadowfang will go with you."

Swiftcloud nodded in understanding, watching as the siamese she-cat turned and padded away. Swiftcloud turned the other way, looking for the cats she would be taking with her into the trees. By the left side of the Tall Stone her patrol had gathered, already expecting the nubby tailed cat's appearance. Shadowfang walked over to greet her, touching his nose to her cheek. Frostfeather smiled at her friends while kneading the ground beside them, her tail-tip twitching slightly. She looked uneasy. Pansypaw leaned into her mentor, giving her a calming, reassuring purr. Tigerfang and Sheeptail tipped their heads to Swiftcloud, ready to obey her orders. Swiftcloud felt strange, knowing she'd be leading some of the clan's most respected senior warriors into battle. On Tigerfang's right side, Rabbitstorm was talking with Tabitha. He seemed a little annoyed, although that wasn't unusual of him.

"Aren't you supposed to stay here and guard the camp? What happens if some of those Treeclan cats break in?" Asked the pregnant she-cat.

"They won't," Rabbitstorm assured. "They've tried before. But we showed them what happens when they trespass in Grassclan's camp. They're not likely to try it again anytime soon. Besides, Ashwhisker's an excellent Guard. He'll protect you and the other queens just fine while I'm away."

Tabitha puffed her cheeks out a little. She pressed her body into the tom's, seeking comfort from him. "I'd rather it be you protecting us. You make me feel safe. And it's not that I don't trust Ashwhisker, he's a very sweet Den Mother, but he's also very skinny. You're so big and muscular. No cat could ever get through you."

"That's why they put me on the backup patrol," Rabbitstorm remarked, licking down his chest fur. Tabitha huffed, pressing herself harder against him. Swiftcloud mustered a small chuckle, shaking her head.
Whitestar soon reappeared from the crowd, making her way

towards the bramble tunnel. The chosen patrols followed her lead, gathering by the camp's exit. Silently, everyone headed out into the meadow, across the snowy hills, and into the frozen land of the Forest Patch. An eerie silence greeted them there. Hardly any birds chortled from the treetops; most still in the south for Leafbare. The ground underpaw was crunchy from ice and long dead debris. But the trees above had begun to come alive with flower buds. There would be sufficient cover for Swiftcloud's patrol to hide, especially once they were deeper into the woods.

Whitestar cautiously led her clan into enemy territory, disregarding Treeclan's scent markers entirely. With luck they'd be setting new ones soon. When they'd traveled a good distance, Whitestar raised her tail, halting her warriors. Cats stood around silently as they watched their leader sign instructions to them. The first patrol was ordered to continue forward. Meanwhile, this spot would be where the second patrol would make their ascent into the trees. Whitestar continued to lead the ground patrol, taking them further into the forest, and soon out of sight.

Swiftcloud was left alone to take charge of her own set of warriors. With as much confidence as she could muster, she commanded her clanmates to begin climbing. Swiftcloud decided to take the initiative, being the first to tackle this strange new terrain. Climbing trees turned out to be a lot easier than she thought. The oaks in this area were large, with sturdy branches jutting out from their thick trunks. The bark was gnarled, and would be easy to grasp under a cat's claws. Swiftcloud started out with a good leap, sinking her claws into the trunk where she landed a couple fox-lengths above the ground. She carefully lifted one paw after the other, pulling herself higher and higher with every move. When a thick tree branch came into reach, she hoisted herself onto it, clinging to the limb as best as she could. From this position, Swiftcloud took notice of how her line of sight had changed. On the forest floor, she could only see a few tail-lengths around her. But up here, she could see at least a bear-length through the woods. She smiled, her confidence growing.

"Come on!" She encouraged her clanmates, waving a paw. The cats in her patrol exchanged wary glances. Among them, Rabbitstorm stepped forward. He grunted, crouching to the floor. Then, with a mighty leap, he'd managed to spring halfway up into his own tree.

Swiftcloud was impressed by his natural climbing skills. The lynx point tom looked to be in his element. And his sister Frostfeather was not too far off herself. The littermates almost appeared squirrel-like in the way that they took to the trees. If Swiftcloud hadn't known any better, she would have sworn they were Treeclan cats. Seeing how easy the three young warriors made the task seem, the remainder of the second patrol made their way up into the forest canopy. Though they appeared uncomfortable, the trap was set. The warriors were eager to put this plan into motion. And it seemed as though they'd get to carry out their task soon enough. In the distance, yowls split through the air. The sounds of angry cats and shredding pelts inchwormed their way closer and closer to the position Swiftcloud's patrol held. If they focused hard enough, the tree bound cats could see the battle being waged. Swiftcloud's fur began to prickle anxiously. She hoped that this plan would succeed, that the clan hadn't gone out of its comfort zone for nothing. *Starclan, grant us the strength to win this fight*, she prayed as she saw Treeclan cats coming closer.

"Hey," Shadowfang's voice cut into her thoughts. Swiftcloud glanced at him from the branch adjacent to her. "It's gonna be fine. Let's kick some Treeclan tail. I'll be right beside you."

Swiftcloud smiled, nodding her head in agreement. The mates moved as if they were one, parachuting down from their perches, onto the backs of the unsuspecting warriors as they appeared. Treeclan's cats let out astonished yowls as they collapsed beneath the patrol's weight one by one.

"It's an ambush!" Someone cried.

"Get them, don't let them take advantage of our own techniques!" A senior warrior called.
Swiftcloud scoffed at the enemy clan's behavior. Shouldn't they have expected that their own tactics would be used against them eventually? Swiftcloud remembered her apprentice training, how she was taught to be wary of her surroundings whether she was in long grass or in a place where cats could jump down on her. Perhaps Treeclan cats were not taught to be so cautious. Maybe they felt too safe in the trees to worry about their enemies gaining the upper paw against them.

A cat hissed up at Swiftcloud, pulling her from her momentary pause in thought. A young warrior, Sleekclaw, lay beneath her paws, pinned by the Grassclan cat's weight. Swiftcloud made quick work of her enemy, biting and throwing him away, back in the direction of home. The young cat let out a whimper, scurrying off into the line of trees with his tail between his legs.
Shadowfang called from nearby, leading Swiftcloud back to his side so they could fight together. The mates charged ahead into the frey. Their muscles rolled and bunched beneath their pelts as they matched perfect pace, paw for paw. They jumped simultaneously at a large Treeclan warrior, knocking him off his feet with a breathless gasp. Swiftcloud jumped off the tom, leaving Shadowfang to pummel him while she struck an approaching she-cat. The cat let out a yowl, lunging to bite Swiftcloud's throat. Swiftcloud was too fast for her, sliding out of the way. She threw the cat onto her side with a hard swipe of her paw. She held the young warrior down, watching as she went limp with defeat. Swiftcloud hissed, sending the cat away.
With the opportunity presented to her Swiftcloud ran to the nearest tree, marking it. She scored her claws along the bark to make it more painfully obviously she was claiming this land for Grassclan. Someone needed to make the first move. Swiftcloud gained pride in knowing it had been her. A few warriors from Grassclan's battle party caught onto what she was doing. They followed Swiftcloud's lead, creating a scent line right through the battlefield.
Wolfheart appeared from the crowd of brawling cats. His teeth drew back in a snarl as he saw what Grassclan was getting up to.

"Take them down!" He commanded. "Show no mercy!"

Warriors surged forward, targeting those who dare defy Treeclan. Swiftcloud was a prime target. Three cats backed her towards a tree, closing off all directions of escape. Swiftcloud recognized each cat, surprised to see some strange faces amongst the fighters. There was Tigerlily, who usually joined the battles. Swiftcloud had been in a couple fights with her before. She was a strong cat, ambitious too, but trustworthy. Usually. In this instance, Swiftcloud couldn't trust any cat outside of her clan.
Then there was Sunflower, Moonface's mate. Swiftcloud hadn't thought he'd join his clanmates as reinforcements. He was a Den

Keeper, she recalled, not a Fighter. But it wasn't unheard of for him to be assigned to a fighting patrol every now and again.
Finally there was young Scarletpaw. She was unaccompanied by her mentor today, though Swiftcloud thought that to be unwise. The small she-cat had never participated in a serious battle. She was young, perhaps even too young to be part of such a huge fight. But a fire burned in her eyes, a passion as strong as any that Swiftcloud had seen in a warrior. It was impressive, really. Apprentices never took things like this so seriously. Either Scarletpaw was invested into the task, or Blazestar was drilling it into his clan's apprentices that they'd need to be as strong and dedicated as possible in this war. It was admirable, really.

"Smelly Grassclan cat!" Scarletpaw spit, taking the first swipe at Swiftcloud. Swiftcloud tried to dodge the young cat's blow, narrowly escaping having her cheek scratch. But just as she moved away from one cat, another lashed out and caught her on the bad shoulder. Swiftcloud hissed in pain, tears stinging the corners of her eyes. Her shoulder wound had been opened again, just when it had finally healed and started to scar over. Swiftcloud bared her fangs, lunging forwarded to bite Tigerlily. Sunflower twisted around, grabbing Swiftcloud by her haunches. He dragged her back, using his weight to force her to the floor, while Tigerlily struck Swiftcloud's weak point again. Swiftcloud yowled out in pain.
From the battlefield, Shadowfang came charging over, throwing himself onto Tigerlily. He grabbed her by the scruff, shaking her like a piece of moss before throwing her away from himself. Then the black tom headbutted Sunflower's flank, knocking him away from his injured mate.

"You alright?" He checked on her with a sniff.

"Yeah, now that you're here," Swiftcloud replied as she stood up.
The mates turned together, attacking their opponents when they dared to return. Tigerlily was the first to strike. She stood up on her hind legs, ready to crush Swiftcloud beneath her. But Swiftcloud was smaller than the other she-cat. With ease, she was able to slip out of her way. As she turned, the white and black patched she-cat stuck out her leg, sweeping it beneath Tigerlily's feet. Tigerlily became unbalanced, falling to the ground with a hard thump.

Swiftcloud was quick to jump on top of her. She grabbed the tabby she-cat by the shoulder, biting with all her might. Her back legs made quick work of the larger molly's belly, scratching it until blood seeped through Tigerlily's thick fur. Tigerlily howled in pain, squirming to get away. Swiftcloud let her, snarling at her as the Treeclan warrior struggled to stand. Scarlettpaw came over and help her clanmate to limp away, defeated. Shadowfang yowled out triumphantly, a sign of his own victory. Swiftcloud chuckled, turning to give her shoulder a few vigorous licks.

"That looks bad. You better go home and get patched up. I think Grassclan has everything handled now," Shadowfang remarked as he returned to the she-cat's side. Swiftcloud had to agree with him. She was in quite a lot of pain, and it appeared Grassclan was winning this fight. Wordlessly she appeased the tom, bumping heads with him before dashing off into the crowd.
As she ran across the battlefield, Wolfheart caught Swiftcloud by one of her back leg. His claws hooked into her thigh, dragging her closer to himself. Swiftcloud let out a yowl, turning and swiping her claws at the larger tom's face. But Wolfheart appeared unfazed, as if the scratches couldn't hurt him at all. Then he growled, forcing Swiftcloud onto the floor with astonishing ease. He pummeled her, back legs tearing at the delicate flesh of her belly, front claws further scarring her shoulder. Swiftcloud cried in pain, struggling to get free from the large tom's grasp. With one final hiss, Wolfheart picked Swiftcloud up and threw her away like crowfood. Swiftcloud groaned, body aching. She forced herself back onto her paws, limping the rest of the way off the battlefield.
Along the way, Swiftcloud was stopped in her tracks by a familiar pelt laying by the border. Tornface, the clan's last living elder, was lying there motionless. New wounds speckled his already scarred, ragged pelt. A lake of blood had formed beneath him. His chest was still, scent turning bitter. A clear sign of his demise. But a peaceful expression was settled upon the old tom's scarred face. He had died a warrior's death. Just as he had wanted. Just as he'd known would happen if he were to come out of retirement.
Oh Tornface... Swiftcloud mourned, turning away. With heart aching, and wounds stinging, the white and black patched molly hurried back into the meadow as fast as her paws could carry her.

Chapter 46

Swiftcloud was one of the first warriors to return home from battle. She was exhausted; aching, bleeding. Almost as soon as she entered through the bramble tunnel she crumpled to the floor. Her chest heaved with effort, tears pooling at the edges of her eyes.
Tabitha hurried over to her in a panic.

"Stars! Swiftcloud, what happened to you!?" She mewled, leaning down to cover her friend with licks. Swiftcloud glanced up at her, whimpering in pain. Goldensong came rushing over, alerted by the scent of blood. She helped Swiftcloud to her paws with Tabitha's assistance, guiding her carefully into the medicine den.

"It's alright now, we've got you," the golden tabby cooed comfortingly. Snowfrost was waiting for them in the heart of the den. Herbs were laid out before her paws in neatly organized piles. She helped guide Swiftcloud into a nest, ordering the injured warrior to lay on her side.

"There's a lot of blood. We're going to need a moss-cobweb combination to soak it all up. Then I think a poultice of broom, horse tail, and marigold would be best to put on her wounds. Goldenrod would work better though, but we'll have to make do with what we have," the older medicine cat noted as she turned.

"How are you feeling, Swiftcloud?" Goldensong asked. But Swiftcloud did not answer. She stared off at nothing, her mind racing. Her hearing was dulled as well, and the world around her felt distant. "She's in shock. Let's give her some thyme and lavender. Some burnet and juniper berries for strength, too."

Snowfrost nodded, picking out herbs with her expertly trained paws. She carried them over to her colleague, seating herself nearby to observe and provide aid.
Goldensong worked hard to gain control of Swiftcloud's shoulder injury. The wound gushed blood, staining the warrior's white fur crimson. Snowfrost passed Goldensong the moss-cobweb mixture,

observing for signs of complications.

"Her wounds are deep," Snowfrost noted, leaning closer.

"But she's young. Surely, she will heal quickly." Goldensong added, applying pressure to the wound. Swiftcloud groaned, gritting her teeth in pain.

"Are you sure about that?" Snowfrost countered. Her eyes were narrowed, focused on the patient.

Goldensong looked at her old mentor, an unreadable expression on her face. "Nothing is ever certain," she meowed carefully, "you've taught me that lesson well."

Snowfrost hummed in response, a noise that sounded acknowledging, yet indignant. Swiftcloud didn't know if she was imagining it, or if her mind was playing tricks on her. She was in shock after all. A lot of things didn't feel real to her at the moment. Snowfrost turned briefly from her partner, leaning down to lick up herbs. She chewed them carefully, spitting them out onto an old oak leaf to settle until Swiftcloud's wounds were under control. After a short while, Goldensong peeled back the cobwebs, assessing the blood loss. Then she scooped up some of the poultice to smear onto the warrior's shoulder. Swiftcloud whimpered and shut her eyes. As she did so, a powerfully sweet scent was stuck under her nose and stuffed into her nest. Swiftcloud took a moment to glance down. Lavender had been placed all around her, it's scent soothing the young molly almost instantly. In front of her, Snowfrost stood waiting to feed the warrior her medicine. Swiftcloud opened her mouth like a baby bird awaiting it's dinner. Snowfrost gave her the herbs, making sure the younger she-cat chewed and swallowed the entire wad of the bitter plants before turning away to create another poultice.
Outside the den, the yowls of various cats broke the silence of camp.

"The warriors are returning!" Lightpaw exclaimed just past the ivy veil, an attempt to summon the medicine cats from their chambers.

"You go, I'll take care of Swiftcloud," Goldensong insisted with a tail

flick. Snowfrost looked at her old apprentice skeptically before picking up a bundle of herbs and carrying them with her into the clearing. When the older medicine cat was gone, Goldensong slipped Swiftcloud some poppy seeds.

"Here, take these. They'll numb the pain while the thyme kicks in. Don't listen to what Snowfrost said. You're... you're going to be just fine."

Swiftcloud didn't like the way Goldensong had put that last statement. But she was in no condition to argue or prod for a further explanation. Instead she licked up the tiny seeds, shuffling in her nest to get more comfortable. Not long after, she began to feel drowsy.

"We're going to need more lavender," Snowfrost meowed as she came back into the den. "Tornface's body was just returned home. And some of the warriors reek of his death stench. Myself included."
Goldensong shook her head slowly, pausing whatever task she had began doing to pass the older she-cat some of the purple flowers. A couple of stems she took and wove into Snowfrost's long fur, perhaps as an easier means to carry them, or even to act as a ward against future fowl odors. Swiftcloud could barely register what was going on anymore, her vision blurry and dark at the edges. Her eyes felt heavy with sleep, and before she'd realized it, the warrior had been pulled into a deep dreamless slumber.
Bright evening light slipped past the ivy tendrils of the medicine den, dappling the clearing in orange and gold. Swiftcloud awoke as one beam rested gently upon her face, greeting her kindly to a world of silence. Swiftcloud let out a yawn. It seemed all the craziness from the battle earlier had finally settled down. *Good*, she thought as she heaved a sigh.

"You're awake," a voice noted from across the den. Swiftcloud turned her head to acknowledge whoever had spoken to her. She hadn't realized another cat was present until now.
Snowfrost sat a tail-length away, a few rows of berries and flowers set at her paws. She appeared to be reorganizing them. At her side was a fat, uneaten mouse. Swiftcloud's belly rumbled, loud enough for the other molly to hear. Snowfrost's expression became soft, a gentle smile pushing at her muzzle.

"You must be famished after what you've gone through today. It's a good thing I grabbed this prey for you," she mewed as she stood. Carefully, as if handling a newborn kit, Snowfrost picked up the mouse and carried it over to Swiftcloud. She settled it in front of the warrior, giving a quiet purr. Swiftcloud glanced up at Snowfrost, a little confused at the medicine cat's behavior. She wasn't usually this sweet towards anyone except her kin, at least not that Swiftcloud had seen. Yet it'd been some time since she had been left in this particular medicine cat's care. Perhaps this was how Snowfrost's nest-side manner was with all of her patients nowadays. Swiftcloud let go of the thought for the time being, distracted by the tasty prey laid out before her. As she bent down take a bite, a strong scent wafted from her meal. The mouse smelled a little too sweetly of lavender, caked in the perfume of the hard working medicine cat. It was almost enough to make Swiftcloud lose her appetite. It wouldn't be so bad if she didn't eat it, right? This prey could better serve to feed a hungry kit, or another injured warrior. Besides, Swiftcloud could fetch herself something else later on.
As she lifted a paw to push the mouse away, Snowfrost's tail came upon her, slapping her in the muzzle. Swiftcloud sat up in surprise. The lynx point molly fixed the younger she-cat with a glare, like a mother staring down her fussy kit. Only, the sensation of her ice blue eyes upon Swiftcloud's pelt was not as warm. Any softness the healer had shown before had completed disappeared.

"You must eat," Snowfrost insisted. "You will never heal if you do not get your strength back up. Besides, prey like this in Leafbare is too precious to waste. The other Hunting warriors worked hard to track that mouse down. Now *eat*." Swiftcloud shrank against the other she-cat's words, recognizing them to be true. Sucking in her breath, she craned her neck and took a slow bite from the prey. Satisfied having seen her at least take a bite, Snowfrost turned around, padding out of the den with a swish of her plumed tail. She took one last glance over her shoulder at Swiftcloud before disappearing from sight. Swiftcloud continued to eat through her prey, enjoying it's meaty flavor until it began to change. Change? Swiftcloud glanced down at the carcass as she swallowed the next mouthful she had taken. A strange red juice oozed from the now open cavity. It was too bright and too runny to be blood. A tingling, almost choking sensation began to scratch Swiftcloud's throat a

moment later. She coughed, pushing the mouse away with a now flailing paw as she tried to catch her breath. Her vision began to swim and ears rang with numbness, her heart beating at an irregular rate. *What's happening to me?!* Swiftcloud began to panic, kneading her claws into the ground by her nest. She wanted to yowl out; beg for someone to come help her, but she couldn't bring herself to do more than gasp. Agony shot through her every nerve; blood roared in her ears. Her life force felt as if it were draining. And soon, everything slipped into darkness.
When Swiftcloud opened her eyes again, a silver shape was hovering above her. Panic shot through the patched molly, causing her to bristle. *Oh no, am I in Starclan!?*

"Swiftcloud..?" A familiar voice spoke to her, sounding distant and dreamy. Swiftcloud blinked a few times, her vision clearing up to reveal the figure in front of her. She was relieved to see that it was not a Starclan warrior at all. It was Mistyleaf who stood above her, staring down at her with full moon wide eyes.
"Swiftcloud!" She breathed, pressing her forehead to the warrior's. Swiftcloud blinked up at her weakly.

"Wh..at...happ..ened...?" She strained her voice to speak, finding her throat to be incredibly sore and dry. The taste of vomit clung to her tongue, making her scrunch up her nose and smack her lips in disgust.

"Something terrible," Mistyleaf responded, voice barely above a whisper. "Something sinister."

"What..?" Swiftcloud asked again.

"You...you were poisoned."

Poisoned?! Swiftcloud sat up straight in her nest, her head feeling heavy as stone. She flopped down onto her side almost instantly, eyes still wide with fear. Someone had tried to kill her?

"You've been unconscious for quite a while. I'm relieved that I was able to get to you in time. For a while I...I thought the clan was going to lose you. That Shadowfang would lose you. That...I was going to lose you...."

"Oh Mistyleaf..." Swiftcloud teared up, her mate lowering her head to rub their muzzles together. "Wait..how long have I been unconscious?"

"It's been about three days. Though you've been in and out of it for a while."

Three days..? Swiftcloud's belly twisted. Hunger and nausea battled within her system, deciding between themselves which would take over the patched molly's senses.

"How did I even survive?"

"I came into the medicine den from herb gathering, and found you choking on the ground. I fed you some yarrow to see if that would help. It was touch and go for a while... I was so worried about you."

"You saved my life." Swiftcloud was starstruck, looking up at her mate with glossy, grateful eyes. Mistyleaf perked up a little, flustered. She groomed down her chest fur, avoiding Swiftcloud's gaze.

"How could I not..? I love you."

Swiftcloud forced herself to stand, burying her face into Mistyleaf's soft fur. She smelled like mint and honey. A fresh, delicate scent that Swiftcloud was addicted to. Mistyleaf purred, licking Swiftcloud between the ears affectionately.

"I should fetch Shadowfang. He'll be thrilled to see you're finally awake. Starclan knows how much strength it took to get him to leave your side."

Swiftcloud nodded her aching head eagerly, watching the beautiful she-cat disappear behind the den's ivy curtain then reappear briefly after. Behind her, a black shadow came rushing past.

"Swiftcloud!" Shadowfang breathed, wrapping his entire body around his mate. He covered her face with licks, a loud purr rumbling in his chest. "Thank the stars! You're alive, you're ok! Starclan...thank you, thank you. Ooh my Swiftcloud..." The black tom rubbed his cheek against hers between licks, tears pricking at

the corners of his eyes. Swiftcloud purred back at him, returning her mate's affections.
Mistyleaf watched the pair fondly. Love glowed in her pale green eyes and tears slipped down her star speckled cheeks. Swiftcloud rose briefly. She grabbed Mistyleaf by the scruff, pulling the larger molly down into the nest to create a cuddle pile. Mistyleaf and Shadowfang shuffled around for a moment until they were laying comfortably together, Swiftcloud trapped between them. The mates took this time together to share tongues in silence. The only sound filling the den was their happy relieved purrs.

"I love you both so much," Swiftcloud mewed softly after a while. She shut her eyes, taking in the presence of her mates.

"We love you too," they answered in unison, pressing themselves further into Swiftcloud. The three remained this way for the rest of the night, content to be engulfed in one another's embrace.

But Swiftcloud did not feel so secure as time passed on. An uneasiness had wormed it's way into her heart, festering like a disease. Her mind raced with the thoughts of her possible demise. Someone had deliberately tried to kill her. Swiftcloud was sure the juice oozing out of the mouse she ate was from deathberries. *Who would want me dead..?* She pondered, going over a list of suspects in her mind.
Treeclan was a prime target to blame. Swiftcloud had been the first to mark a new border within their territory, and had meddled with clan affairs on numerous occasions. And some, including Blazestar, still blamed her for the kitnapping of Skunkpaw. It made sense that someone in Treeclan would seek vengeance on her. But Swiftcloud wasn't willing to believe any Treeclan cat was responsible for this, just as she was sure they hadn't poisoned some of the other deceased warriors in Grassclan. So that only left the possibility of the assassin being within her own borders. Swiftcloud contemplated very hard, trying to piece together clues from the previous poisonings. What were the common factors between all of them? Who was around when all of the poisoned cats were found?
Snowfrost!
Swiftcloud sat up in her nest, eyes wide at the realization. Mistyleaf shuffled beside her slightly, aware of her mate's movements.

Swiftcloud settled herself back down, resting her head on her paws as she continued considering the possibility. Snowfrost had been passing by when Swiftcloud had discovered Waspwing's corpse. She was the one to give an excuse for Butterflytail's seizures. Snowfrost had returned moments after Ambereye had collapsed in camp. And she was the one to insist Swiftcloud eat that mouse. It all made perfect sense. But could Swiftcloud really rely on this evidence to prove that the medicine cat was guilty? She wasn't sure.
Fatigue began to work it's way into the weary warrior, pulling her back into unconsciousness.

When she awoke, Swiftcloud found herself in a dimly lit forest. The trees surrounding her were nothing more than blackened silhouettes, the canopy above her a void. Fog pooled around her paws like water, and snow cascaded down from the unseen sky in thick, heavy clumps. A chilling breeze ruffled through the molly's short fur, carrying with it the sickening stench of death.

"Where am I..?" Swiftcloud bristled as she glanced around. In the darkness surrounding her, the patched warrior began to hear the painful cries of other cats. Panic shot through her, forcing her into a defensive crouch. Her heartbeat quickened, drumming loudly in her ears. Yet not loud enough to mask the mysterious sounds of the woods.
Suddenly something brushed past her from behind, and tugged on her short tail. Swiftcloud nearly jumped out of her fur. The scared molly sprang to her paws instantly, taking off into the icy forest as fast as her legs could carry her. The woods seemed to be closing in around her as she moved, narrowing Swiftcloud's path until there was only one way she could go. The ground beneath her paws dipped, pulling her further and further along into the unknown. Swiftcloud began to slip, the frost beneath her paws making her footsteps unsteady.

"Swift...swift...swift..." The forest itself seemed to whispering to her ominously.
Just ahead, a dried up ravine came into view, marking the end of the path. It curved around like a claw, giving way to a dead end. Swiftcloud skidded to a halt by the earthy wall, turning tail to run back in the opposite direction. But when she looked at where she came from, she noticed her exit was blocked by a wall of eyeless cats. Deceased cats, Swiftcloud realized; her clanmates. Poppycloud, Waspwing, Butterflytail,

Ambereye, and Heatherwing were here. So was little Dovekit. Swiftcloud recognized Cricketsong's most recent litter among the crowd as well. But there were some other cats surrounding her that Swiftcloud didn't recognize. One looked far too similar to Chicorynose, another closer to Quailbelly. Who were they? What did these spirits want?
Swiftcloud backed away from the ghosts slowly, her hindquarters making contact with the wall of the ravine. Why were they all here, she wondered. Why weren't these cats at peace in Starclan? Was it because they were all murdered? Because their killer had not been brought to justice?
Swiftcloud stared at the cats in front of her, petrified. Frost coated their pelts, red liquid dripping from the their jaws. Their expressions were set like stone; lifeless. Far too uncanny.

"Beware, snow's unyielding frost," one of the mysterious cats whispered.

"Be..beware?" Swiftcloud stammered with a gulp.

"It draws the night closer," Dovekit chimed in, her tiny voice shrill and haunting. "They will destroy the Star. Fortify yourself. Swiftness will save us... Help us all."

"Help us...help us...help us....!" The other cats began to wail, their voices growing louder and louder. The snow fell harder with their caterwauls, filling the ravine within the blink of an eye; trapping Swiftcloud. She tried to yowl for help, urging her limbs to move before she was buried alive. But it was no use. Her voice was swallowed up by the foul smelling wind, her body frozen where it stood. All Swiftcloud could do was cry pitifully as the ghosts of clanmates passed watched on, their bodies encased in ice....

Swiftcloud awoke with a start. Her heart was racing like a rabbit in her chest. The nightmare she had hung heavy in her mind as she sat up in her nest, still panting.
Now, Swiftcloud was certain that Snowfrost was responsible for all of this; for all the wrongful deaths of the clan. Somehow, some way. That had to have been what her dream meant. But Swiftcloud knew other cats would disagree with this conclusion. Snowfrost was a medicine cat, others would reason, she would never cause harm to any cat. *Then why did she try to kill me?* Swiftcloud thought to herself bitterly, remembering the sickeningly sweet and sharp taste

of deathberries in the back of her throat. She shuttered slightly, once again forcing herself to relax for the sake of her sleeping mates. In the morning, she'd have to talk to Whitestar. To tell her of this revelation, and hopefully convince the leader that Snowfrost was dangerous. *I have to protect the clan*, Swiftcloud told herself. *This is the only way. Whitestar must know the truth. But... will she believe me? Will anybody believe me?*

Chapter 47

Swiftcloud emerged from the medicine den at dawn's first light. She was one of the very first cats awake in camp, besides the Guards posted outside the bramble tunnel. The clearing was silent, and cold; a foreboding scene after the nightmare she had suffered through the evening before. A cloud puffed from her lips as she heaved a sigh, blinking her heavy eyes. Though a lot of her wounds had healed, she felt sore all over. A product of being dormant for days. Swiftcloud yearned to leave the confines of the camp to do something productive and to clear her mind. Joining the dawn patrol sounded pleasant. Hunting would be even better. But Swiftcloud knew she had a much more pressing matter to attend to first.

Quietly, she picked her way over to the center of camp, approaching the occupied den within Tall Stone. As she walked, movement over by the honeysuckle bush caught her eye. Swiftcloud suddenly stopped dead in her tracks, finding herself in the path of her would-be murderer for the first time since her poisoning. Her ears drew back in fear, a paw raising defensively to her chest. Her focus became trained ahead, locked upon the suspicious medicine cat. Snowfrost stood erect as she fully emerged into the clearing, head held high and confidently. Her eyes flickered as if she were lost in deep thought, before her attention was swiftly drawn onto a cat behind her.

Jaybird came rushing out from the nursery, a sour expression upon her face. She spoke with her sister in a hushed tone, a sense of agitation lingering in the air surrounding them. From this distance, Swiftcloud could not make out the words the queen was whispering, although she could pick up on the hiss in the silver tabby's mew. Snowfrost seemed annoyed by whatever the conversation involved, her icy blue eyes rolling with disinterest. Jaybird growled, sticking her snout into the air before taking off across the clearing. Snowfrost hesitated for a few moments, watching her sister leave the camp before her focus made it's way onto Swiftcloud. Her eyes rested upon the white and black patched molly like a snowstorm; dark and icy, chilling Swiftcloud just as the

weather in her nightmare had. Swiftcloud had to shake out her pelt to remind herself that she was not still frozen there, to pull herself back into reality. The reality in which her attempted killer was standing face to face with her. Swiftcloud suppressed a shiver, slipping into Tall Stone before the medicine cat had the chance to confront her. *That was close*, Swiftcloud sighed and blinked, allowing herself to adjust to the dim lighting of the den.

"Whitestar?" She called softly as she lingered in the threshold. She caught movement by the boulder's back wall within a heartbeat, before a gleaming set of blue eyes fell upon her. A second pair of ambers shone along with them.

"Swiftcloud?" Whitestar breathed, as though she were astonished to see Swiftcloud up and about. Swiftcloud bowed her head respectfully in response.

"I need to speak with you urgently," the white and black patched warrior mewed, giving Tigerfang a wary glance, "alone."

Whitestar let out a loud yawn, nudging her mate with her shoulder. Tigerfang groaned quietly, rolling around. After a heartbeat he sat upright and rose to his paws, giving his haunches a good stretch.

"...s'ppose I could go on the dawn patrol," he murmured groggily, tiptoing out of his shared nest. Tigerfang gave Whitestar a few affectionate licks on the cheek before shuffling past Swiftcloud and out of the den. Swiftcloud tipped her head politely to the senior warrior as he passed, inviting herself in further.

"It's good to see you on your paws, Swiftcloud," Whitestar commented as she sat upright. "Snowfrost told me your condition had gotten worse, once you'd come home from battle. It's a relief to see that you have recovered. Starclan knows what the clan would have done if we'd lost you."

"I'd thank Mistyleaf if I were you. She's the one who saved my life," Swiftcloud responded, wanting her mate to be given proper credit.

Whitestar nodded acknowledgingly. "I'll be sure to do so. Are you feeling well? How are your injuries?"

"I'm a bit stiff from laying dormant so long. And my injuries are healing well, as far as I know. I hope to be able to go on some patrols soon. However, there's something that's still bothering me," Swiftcloud meowed. She was flattered that Whitestar cared about her so much. But she couldn't sit around and idly chat right now, as much as she'd like to.

"I suppose that would be the urgent matter that's brought you to my den so early, hm?" Whitestar asked. She began to groom, giving Swiftcloud the chance to explain herself.

"Yes, Whitestar. You see, I've been going over some things in my head. And as a result...I believe I've cracked a few of our cold cases," she began, puffing up her chest in an attempt to grow more confident.

"Have you?" Whitestar prompted. "Why have you chosen to present this evidence to me, then? Shouldn't you be telling Dewstone?"

"I will, but it's important that you're the first cat to know. This knowledge requires immediate action. Because I believe the clan is in danger....There's a murderer in our ranks."
At this, Whitestar perked up. She was intrigued for sure, but Swiftcloud couldn't help but notice the look of skepticism on the leader's face. She couldn't blame her for being doubtful. Whitestar knew each and every cat in Grassclan personally. It would be hard for her to consider that any one of her clanmates would kill in cold blood. Swiftcloud could hardly believed it herself. Had she not almost become a victim, she probably would have never suspected either. And that realization made Swiftcloud feel anxious. She began to doubt herself before she'd even presented her case. But she couldn't back down now. Someone had to find out the truth. With a deep breath, Swiftcloud continued;
"Whitestar...I have reasons to suspect that Snowfrost may be responsible for the deaths of some of our warriors."
Whitestar stared at Swiftcloud for a few tense heartbeats. Her expression was unreadable but her eyes were clouded as if in deep contemplation. Swiftcloud took this as her sign to press on.
"You see; I bumped into Snowfrost while searching for evidence of Waspwing's murder, back when I was an apprentice. I noticed she was acting strangely, but never really thought anything of it until

now. Snowfrost was also the *only* cat who conveniently knew what prompted Butterflytail to start seizing. She was suspiciously absent at the time Ambereye came home poisoned as well. And... I think Snowfrost may have tried to poison me. She fed me a mouse, insisting that I eat it. But it must have been filled with deathberries. I saw this strange red liquid coming out of it. Afterwards I started choking, and my heart began pounding abnormally fast. That's when I passed out, and why I remained unconscious for three days." Again, Whitestar didn't respond. But now her brows were furrowed. Her eyes had drifted away from Swiftcloud, staring off at nothing. They flickered slightly as if Whitestar were searching through all the information that had been given to her. A tense silence claimed the den, lingering only for a few moments more.

"Is that all you have to prove your claim?" She finally spoke, sitting up a little taller. Swiftcloud swallowed back the lump that had formed in her throat. He nubby tail wiggled anxiously as she tried to find a way to respond. "Is there any physical evidence? What happened to the mouse you were fed?"

"It-It must have been discarded. Other than that, and my theory, I...I don't have any other evidence," Swiftcloud confessed. "But do I really need any more? Everything that I've said should be evidence enough; at least enough start being c*autious* of Snowfrost."

"Maybe so. But if we do not have any solid proof, other than your word, then there is nothing I can do with the information you have given me. And it's not that's I don't trust you Swiftcloud. You are an honorable warrior, and a reliable cat. But...this accusation seems far-fetched. I might even dare say unjust. What you have presented to me can all be summed up as mere coincidence." Whitestar rose to her paws. "Snowfrost has never shown herself to be capable of such heinous crimes. She's a pacifist, as most medicine cats are, despite her occasional snappiness. And though at times she may be disliked, or a bit careless of her duties, she is still our senior medicine cat. It's very bold of you to come here and make such harsh claims against her without something more tangible than an educated guess."

"Please. I mean no disrespect," Swiftcloud insisted, crouching to the ground, "but I'm sure of what I know. I wouldn't come to you and talk about something so serious if I wasn't. Snowfrost is dangerous!"

Whitestar heaved a sigh, looking away from the young warrior. Disappointment conquered the leader's features, her tail curling around her front legs. Swiftcloud felt her heart sink. "I'm sorry, but I can't accept this without any further proof. There is nothing I can do..."

"You can't," Swiftcloud challenged, "or you won't?"
Whitestar fell silent once more, continuing to avert Swiftcloud's gaze. Frustration boiled within the younger molly, the likes of which she'd never felt before. If smoke could bellow from her ears, then it would.
"Fine.... I'll find a way to prove my claim. Before another one of our clanmates has to needlessly to die. I will save our clan, Whitestar. I swear I will."
Swiftcloud rose to her paws, quickly turning on her heels. Anger and upset burned inside her belly as she stormed out of the leader's den. She spared a glance over her shoulder as she went. Whitestar remained unmoving, unchanging in her stance and decision. Swiftcloud felt her belly twist into a knot and forced herself to look away again.
Outside the den, Swiftcloud allowed her head to hang heavy. Her mind raced with thoughts, of excuses for why her evidence wasn't good enough. It couldn't be possible that Whitestar would reject her idea so easily. Surely she would want to continue investigating, rather than dismissing the claim altogether.
Was Whitestar afraid of something? Of Snowfrost? Or perhaps even of Starclan's wrath? Did she fear that their warrior ancestors would become angry if she considered the possibility of her medicine cat being a killer? Swiftcloud could only assume so. Anyone in their right mind would feel the same. But to Swiftcloud, the anger of Starclan was not as upsetting to her. None of her kin resided within Silverpelt. Even if she'd fully placed her faith upon them, and in the systems that made up the Land's Star, it didn't make her blindly fear the scorn of countless dead cats. The wrongdoings which effected Grassclan were taking place in the living realm. That's all that Swiftcloud could allow herself to focus on. Why couldn't anyone else feel the same way? Why couldn't Whitestar?

"Swiftcloud is that you!?" A voice snapped Swiftcloud out of her thoughts, forcing her to stand upright with alarm. Tabitha came

bounding over, her tail kinked over her back in greetings. Chicorynose was right behind her, a smile cast on her fawn colored face. Swiftcloud relaxed instantly at the sight of her mentor and apprentice.

"Tabitha, Chicorynose, it's so good to see you!" Swiftcloud greeted with a friendly nod to each cat. She felt like she hadn't seen them in moons.

"I can't believe it, you're alive!" Tabitha trilled, coming to a halt by the warrior. She let out a loud purr, beaming as brightly as the morning sun.

"How are you feeling?" Chicorynose asked with concern. "We were worried about you, you know."

"I'm feeling kinda down, if I'll be honest. But I think it's from being unconscious for so long," Swiftcloud replied, voice monotone. She yearned to tell Chicorynose about her ordeal with Whitestar only moments ago, hoping that her old mentor could provide some comfort. After all, Swiftcloud had come to see her as a second mother over the seasons. But she knew if she shared, Chicorynose's loyalty in this situation would go to Whitestar. They were sisters, and had a strong bond. Stronger than her bond with Swiftcloud. So Swiftcloud bit her tongue, keeping her true feelings bottled inside to handle at another time.

"Ooh, I missed you so much!" Tabitha cut in. "From the way Snowfrost was talking, I was scared you weren't going to make it!"

"What do you mean? What was Snowfrost saying about me?" Swiftcloud questioned, fur prickling slightly. What lies had Snowfrost been spreading in the time that she'd been rendered unconscious?

"I overheard her telling Rabbitstorm that your injuries were bad, and that you probably wouldn't last the next quarter moon. Something about an internal infection? I remember they were talking about it because Rabbitstorm was curious. You were the only cat who hadn't recovered from the battle yet, and he thought that was odd."

"I don't have any internal injuries, or an infection," Swiftcloud assured, though her tone came off as confused. *Was that how Snowfrost was planning on covering up my death?* As she thought on it a little more, Swiftcloud felt sure of it. It seemed to line up with how some of the other murders were played off, such as Butterflytail's. It wasn't out of the question for Snowfrost to lie about a patient's condition in order to take the blame off of herself.

"Well that's a relief! Ooh I'm so happy to have you back, Swifty. Hey, wanna come on the hunting patrol with us?" Tabitha asked.

"We already have Beetlepatch and Slugsnout coming along with us, but I don't see a problem with you joining as well," Chicorynose added, swaying her plumed tail.

Swiftcloud thought for a heartbeat. "That sounds great, actually, I'd love to come," she agreed. Tabitha quivered her tail with delight while Chicorynose gave a curt nod. She beckoned her apprentices, old and new, to follow her to the bramble tunnel. Swiftcloud happily padded after her, ready to leave the camp behind for the rest of the morning.

Chapter 48

It was just after sunhigh when Swiftcloud and her patrol returned back to Grassclan's camp. Their jaws were full of prey from a successful hunt; their catches plumper than they'd been in moons. Each cat took their turn depositing their contribution to the fresh-kill pile. Then with a few mews of farewell they separated, ready to share tongues with family and friends around the clearing.
Swiftcloud decided that she wanted to take the prized shrew she had caught to the elder's den. She made it about a quarter of the way to the gorse bush before stopping, a pang of sadness squeezing her heart. There weren't any elders around to feed anymore. They'd all died during the height of Leafbare. Like so many others in the clan.
Unsure of what to do, Swiftcloud instead decided to claim the shrew for herself, padding over to lounge in the shade of the warrior's den. She'd be dining alone today, both of her mates busy with their own duties at the moment. Swiftcloud dropped the prey at her paws, laying down before it with her head bowed. She whispered a silent prayer to Starclan then began tucking into her meal. Her stomach growled in appreciation, thankful to be filled after so long. The juicy meat of the shrew was just what she needed after that long walk through the meadow. Swiftcloud let out a satisfied purr once her meal was nothing more than fur and bone. She began to groom herself, continually trying to relax and forget about the upsetting events from earlier in the day. The hunt had helped her immensely with her stiffness and pain. But the activity could not quell the upset that had singed her heart when Whitestar had rejected her evidence. Swiftcloud understood why Whitestar would make the decision that she had. But it hadn't made the rejection any easier to bare. Swiftcloud decided that after relaxing for a little while more, she'd try and present her case to Dewstone instead. Perhaps she would receive a better result that way. Even though Snowfrost was Dewstone's aunt, Swiftcloud doubted the Code Keeper would allow her kinship with the guilty medicine cat to cloud her judgement. She was a very logical minded molly. She'd surely choose to believe evidence over her knowledge of her aunt's

behavior and personality.
As Swiftcloud lounged, soaking in the beauty of the day, something odd caught her attention. The scent of a familiar yet highly unwelcomed patrol made its way into into nose. Alarmed, she let out a yowl, jumping up and racing to the bramble tunnel. Swiftcloud was the first alert, and the first cat whoever may be coming would get to see.
At her call, her clanmates began to gather around. Guards pushed their way to the front of the crowd, holding their heads high and puffing out their chests. Nosy apprentices weaved past awaiting warriors. Ashwhisker shooed the other camp-bound queens and kits into the nursery while he blocked the entrance, ready to defend his denmates without question. The last of the clan to present themself was Whitestar, who gracefully slipped past her cats to stand beside Swiftcloud.

"Do you smell that?" Swiftcloud asked her leader. "It smells like... the river?" There was something else entangled between the scents of the approaching Treeclan patrol and the boggy musk of the river as well. It was bitter, and too recognizable for Swiftcloud's liking. Her ears folded back against her head, her legs beginning to tremble. Something was terribly wrong. Before she even saw what it was, Swiftcloud already knew what sight was about to behold her.
Finally the visiting cats showed themselves, crawling through the bramble tunnel one by one. The first to appear was Cardinaltail, Treeclan's Code Keeper. His mostly white fur prickled with anxiety as he skulked past Swiftcloud to stand at Whitestar's side and turn. Whitestar gave the harmless tom a look which bore unspoken questions. Cardinaltail simply directed her towards his companions with a glance as they came into view.
The next cat to appear from the brambles was Embersong, Scarletpaw's mother. The dilute calico entered the clearing backwards, clearly dragging something along with her. She did not divert from her task, though her eyes did wander onto the enemy clan surrounding her. The fur on the back of her neck rose at the sight, her attention snapping back onto what she held in her jaws.
The third cat to enter the clearing did not do so by their own accord. The sopping wet body of a sleek silver tabby was hauled into the open with quite a bit of effort. The whole of Grassclan seemed to tense at the sight. Sharp gasps rose from the crowd and

cats began to bristle, wide eyed with distraught. Swiftcloud too found herself in such a state as she recognized who this drenched cat was. *Jaybird*. Her body hung limply in the jaws of the Treeclan warriors who dragged her into the camp. Her eyes were shut tight, jaws parted as if in a silent cry for help. The scent of the river and death swirled around her in a thick musky cloud that made some cats in the front lines look as though they were ready to vomit. As more of the clan caught on to what had become of the beautiful queen, whines and wails of sorrow began to break the silence.

"Jaybird!" Cricketsong's wail came out the loudest of all. The light brown tabby queen shoved past her clanmates, practically bowling one of her daughters out of the way to make it to her best friend's side. The final Treeclan warrior to enter the camp, Smokecloud, gently placed Jaybird's back end on the ground as Cricketsong raced over. He took a pace back to stand beside Swiftcloud, looking on with soft, sympathetic eyes. Swiftcloud looked back at him, blinking a silent thank you before returning her sights onto the still form of the deceased queen.
With Jaybird returned, Grassclan began to file in to inspect and grieve around her soaking wet body. Dewstone, Rabbitstorm, Frostfeather, and Mistyleaf were allowed to push their way to the front. The littermates immediately brought themselves to cling to Cricketsong's side, burying their noses into their mother's flank. Dewstone posted herself by Jaybird's head, pressing their foreheads together to create a loving yet mournful pose. Cricketsong pushed her muzzle into Mistyleaf's fluffy neck fur, muffling her loud, harsh sobs. Swiftcloud abandoned her place by the brambles to flank Mistyleaf's other side, pressing her smaller body against her mate's comfortingly. Goldensong came to join her, putting herself beside her apprentice and Cricketsong. She purred softly in an attempt to soothe the grieving cats around her. Frostfeather started to groom Jaybird as if she were doing nothing more than sharing tongues; though the grief stricken look on her face was unmistakable. Quailbelly managed to squeeze between her and her brother to assist, the mates' cheeks pressed together supportively.
Rabbitstorm nuzzled fiercely against Jaybird's belly, trying to rouse the stiff bodied queen from her permanent slumber. If one strained they could hear him muttering to her, begging her to wake up; her kits needed her, the clan needed her.

"Mama, please!" Rabbitstorm blubbered, pushing himself deeper into the molly's belly. His large fluffy body shook violently as he too began to wail with great sorrow. The sounds of his crying summoned Snowfrost from the throng of cats around them. Swiftcloud noticed Snowfrost winced slightly at the sight of her dead sister, before her attention diverted completely onto Rabbitstorm. The lynx point molly curled her body around Rabbitstorm, her tongue gently rasping over his ear. She whispered to him, softly, soothingly. Yet Rabbitstorm hardly noticed her presence.
Swiftcloud growled at the display. How could Snowfrost choose to give her attention to Rabbitstorm in this moment when her sister was laying dead in front of her? She wasn't even crying. Swiftcloud knew medicine cats were used to occurrences such as injury and death. But even Goldensong wept when her mother had passed. Snowfrost didn't show even the slightest signs of mourning. Others might've believed she was maintaining composure for the sake of her kin. But Swiftcloud knew better. She recalled Jaybird arguing with her sister in the morning. *Could it be possible that Snowfrost drowned Jaybird?* She wondered. Swiftcloud was aware that the medicine cat was not beyond killing without reason. But her method was passive. Was Snowfrost really capable of something so violent, especially against her own littermate? Swiftcloud couldn't be sure. And though she'd like to jump to that conclusion--especially to give Jaybird's spirit closure--there could be better explanations for Jaybird dying in the river's currents. She could have slipped while hunting along the riverbank. Or a vengeful Treeclan warrior could have snuck into the territory to teach Grassclan a lesson. There was no way to be sure. Swiftcloud shook her head a little, dismissing her turbulent thoughts for the time being.

"Wait- Who's going to care for the kits?" Mistyleaf piped out of nowhere, glancing from her deceased mother over to the nursery. After a short period of silence, Rabbitstorm perked up.

"I'll take care of them," he volunteered, voice cracking. "I wanted to be a queen before, when Heatherwing was alive and expecting... I'd still like to. Besides, it's what Jaybird would want. She'd be happiest if kin looked out for them. And... We've lost both of our mothers... the kits will need more support now than ever before."

"I'll help raise them too," Tabitha offered, making her way closer to Jaybird's corpse.
Rabbitstorm's focus fell upon Whitestar, seeking her approval. Whitestar nodded in agreement without hesitation.

"So be it," she declared, wrapping her plumed tail neatly around her paws as she sat down. Her head turned to give Cardinaltail her attention. "What happened to her?"

Cardinaltail cleared his throat, tail-tip swaying slightly. "One of our warriors spotted Jaybird washed up on the creek shore," he began, eyes darkened.
Rabbitstorm's head jerk upward at the sound of the tom's voice. His ears tilted forward, showing his eagerness to listen in on the conversation. Swiftcloud wondered if it was such a good idea for him to find out, but maybe hearing would help bring closure in a way. And she couldn't deny that she was curious too.
"She was already dead when they found her. I believe she may have fallen into the river on your territory and was carried downstream into ours."

"Fallen into the river?" Whitestar echoed. "How could she have done such a thing? Jaybird was always such a careful cat. She would not have drawn so close to the water's edge that she could have slipped."

"Actually," Snowfrost raised her voice. "I did see Jaybird when I was out gathering herbs earlier. She was at the riverbank on the outskirts of the Forest Patch, having a drink. It could be entirely possible that she slipped..." The lynx point molly hung her head at the statement.
Whispers traveled between Swiftcloud's clanmates, accusations and guesses of the cause of Jaybird's demise being passed around like prey. Swiftcloud dipped her head to give Jaybird a few licks on the shoulder. Her heart now pounded with emotion. Tears flowed down the white and black patched molly's cheeks. Her eyes lay low, examining the silver tabby queen. As she looked, a small white something caught the young molly's attention. She perked up, bringing her nose down to inspect it. There was something trapped between Jaybird's claws. Swiftcloud peeled the she-cat's front toes apart, revealing a small white chunk of fur stuck between them.

Swiftcloud let out a small gasp, earning Rabbitstorm's attention beside her. The fluffy tom leaned in to take a look at what Swiftcloud found. A low, deep growl rose from Rabbitstorm's throat, his eyes narrowing to icy slits which eerily resembled Snowfrost's. A shiver ran down Swiftcloud's spine and she had to resist the urge to jolt.
In a flash, Rabbitstorm sprang away from Jaybird's side. He let out a mighty yowl, unsheathing his claws as he bowled Cardinaltail over. The mostly white and ginger tom let out a shriek of surprise, collapsing under the almost equally massive tom's weight. He wriggled in the younger cat's grasp, trying to slip away as Rabbitstorm pummeled him. Alarm sparked between Embersong and Smokecloud, their instincts making them leap into action. Embersong landed on Rabbitstorm's back while Smokecloud reached for Cardinaltail's scruff to drag him from the frey. Rabbitstorm twisted to reach the offending molly, pulling tufts of fur from her pelt as he swiped his claws at her wildly. Gingerstrike launched himself out of the crowd into the brawl, lending his claws as he batted at Smokecloud who yowled out in shock. Rabbitstorm seemed to blink up at him thankfully, the pair teaming up to attack the enemy warriors.

"Fox-hearts! Murderers!" Rabbitstorm spat, long fur fluffed to double his size, a paw raising to deliver another blow.

"Enough!" Whitestar demanded, jumping into the scuffle if only to put the fighting cats in their place. The pretty siamese she-cat smacked Gingerstrike away, then forced Rabbitstorm onto his side where she held him down. She growled down at him, tail lashing, before turning her head to address the Treeclan cats.
"Back away, please," she requested her voice never losing its calmness. Her focus then turned back to Gingerstrike and Rabbitstorm. Disappointment shone strong in her expression, making the warriors lower their heads in shame.
"You two, away to your den, and do not emerge until I allow you to." Whitestar's tone turned serious, but sounded as if she were chiding her own kits moreso than scolding two full grown warriors. Gingerstrike and Rabbitstorm exchanged a glance, turning tail to tuck themselves away as demanded. Satisfied with their departure, Whitestar walked herself over to Swiftcloud's side. Swiftcloud

remained crouched, feeling a little intimidated by the leader's eyes which now rested upon her. Though she figured Whitestar was not here to chide her as well. Instead, Swiftcloud decided to show her the discovery, which could have been the cause of Rabbitstorm's sudden outburst. Whitestar's eyes widened as she got a glimpse of the fur in Jaybird's claws. Once again, the Grassclan leader's attention was given back to the Treeclan cats. The three cats in question were battered and prickly, remaining poised for another fight. Whitestar marched over to them.

"Why is there fur between Jaybird's claws?" She challenged. "If she had simply fallen into the river, she would have mud in her pawpads. Not fur. Especially not white fur." The slightest hint of agitation was twisted within Whitestar's tone, her tail-tip twitching a bit. The Treeclan warriors seemed to stiffen more, exchanging glances.

"H..how dare your cats attack our Code Keeper!" Embersong hissed, tail lashing violently. A good chunk of her cheek fur had been ripped out, and it seemed a small drop of blood was trickling down her chin. Worry was clouding her eyes, and perhaps something else. Was that guilt? Fear? Did Embersong know something?

Whitestar took another step towards them. "Do not change the subject," She growled. "Answer my question."

Embersong gave no response. Instead she whipped around, gently headbutting Cardinaltail. Cardinaltail got the message, turning and crawling out of camp without question.

"Treeclan has done nothing wrong. Blazestar will hear about this!" Embersong threatened, following the tom out. Smokecloud shook his head slowly, remaining stationary.

"We will investigate the matter further, Whitestar. We are just happy to return Jaybird home. Now..goodbye." With that the smokey grey tom slipped through the bramble tunnel to pursue his clanmates. At his departure, the clan erupted into discussion. Swiftcloud had to hold herself back from joining in while she collected her thoughts. For now, she listened in on the conversations around her.

"What odd behavior," Tigerfang commented a foxlength away, licking a paw then running it over his ear.

"Do you think Treeclan could have done this?" Pollenpaw asked her mentor, voice shaky.

"I wouldn't put it past those tree-lickers," growled Snailear, tail lashing. "It isn't the first time a cat of ours has ended up dead on Treeclan territory recently."

"Then why are we letting them get away?!" hissed Nectarpaw who's short tabby and white fur was bristling.

"Because Rabbitstorm and Gingerstrike did enough damage to them already," Cowpatch chimed in calmly. He brought himself to his daughter's side. "And we have no evidence that one of their clan is guilty."

"But Jaybird was found dead on Treeclan territory. And Swiftcloud found fur between her claws," Slugsnout pointed out.

"That sounds like just cause to retaliate, in my opinion." Ladybugbite nodded, smoothing down her shoulder fur.

"Yeah, and they could have killed Jaybird to get revenge on us for taking so much of the Forest Patch," Pollenpaw theorized.

"Treeclan would be petty enough to hold onto a grudge like that...Especially with that flea-brained Blazestar at the helm," croaked Ashwhisker.

"If that's the case, then they took things too far. Jaybird did not need to die." That was Sheeptail's loud meow; his voice cracked slightly with grief.

"Poor, sweet Jaybird." Cricketsong moved to sit by the other queen's head. Dewstone stood to give the queen some space. "I will miss you greatly. No other cat could hold a conversation quite like you could." The light brown tabby's mew drew the attention of her clanmates around her. It seemed collectively they had realized now was a time of mourning. They could become riled up about Treeclan later. Moving as one unit, the clan came to settle around

Jaybird's body. Swiftcloud lifted her head to look upon the grieving faces around her. She had never seen so many cats mourning another for so long.
She recalled when Poppycloud had died. There had been a similar vigil held for her, though it seemed mostly young cats had stayed by her side most of the night. Another cat quickly entered Swiftcloud's thoughts. Ambereye. The amber she-cat's vigil had only managed to keep those who were close to her there throughout her final night with the clan. Most others had only paused to leave parting words before leaving to go about their business. Swiftcloud's mind then shifted to Waspwing. His vigil had been of few attendance. Every cat had come to say goodbye, but most had only done so briefly with the exception of his kin and Bumblethroat. Butterflytail's last day with the clan had been similar.
Perhaps it had something to do with the impact the cats had on one another. Those who were popular received more attention in their passing. With this theory in mind, Swiftcloud figured this meant that Jaybird had been well loved. And for good reason, too.
All the queens had managed to make it past the rest of the clan now, settling at the sides of Jaybird and her kits. Collectively, they groomed Jaybird dry as they whispered prayers of safe travels to Starclan. Other clanmates joined them in this prayer. Eventually some began to get up and leave, heading to their dens to rest up for the next hunt or patrol. Others who hadn't the chance to see Jaybird before got to do so now that the crowd had thinned. The apprentices all curled around Jaybird's stiff body; Cricketsong's litter kept close to one another as the sisters cried for their lost ex-denmate while Pansypaw helped groom Jaybird. Whitestar fetched Rabbitstorm and Gingerstrike so they could return and mourn once more before taking herself to her den. Lightpaw and Thornpaw came out of the apprentice's den not long after, joining Cinderkit and Bunnykit who had just been summoned from their den to say goodbye. Jaybird's youngest litter nudged and mewled at their mother, asking the surrounding Grassclan cats why the queen would not get up. Quailbelly stood, sweeping her tail around them to guide them towards Frostfeather. Together the two she-cats did their best to explain the situation, and to teach the kits about death.
Swiftcloud found herself getting up to leave the vigil, heart too heavy to hang around and grieve any longer. Thoughts swarmed in her head like angry bees as she took one final look at the lost she-

cat, Jaybird. *This shouldn't have happened...* She thought, turning tail to stalk away. Swiftcloud hadn't realized how much the loss of the queen would affect her. But rather than sad, now she found herself full of rage. She shouldn't be out here anymore among her clanmates. If another cat should say something about Treeclan again, she doubted she could bite back her tongue this time. Treeclan had to pay for this, but would do so in due time. It was Whitestar's call, what they would do. For now, Swiftcloud would sleep off her anger. She slipped into the warrior's den, curling up in her nest with a heavy sigh. A few heartbeats after settling, a warmth pressed into her side. Swiftcloud lifted her head to see Shadowfang laying beside her now, eyes clouded with grief. Swiftcloud rasped her tongue against his forehead soothingly while he returned the gesture, grooming her scarred shoulder. Swiftcloud shuffled in their nest a little more to become more comfortable, tucking her nose beneath Shadowfang's chin. Soon, sleep blanketed over them.

Chapter 49

The morning's arrival felt like a moon away. The night had hung heavy over Grassclan, and still lingered come dawn in the form of thick clouds. The warrior's den remained shrouded in darkness, as if Starclan themselves were urging the clan to stay inside and mourn another loss. Yet when Swiftcloud awoke, she found herself all alone. Outside, a meeting had been called. When she pushed her way through the narrow entrance of the warrior's den, she was met with a chorus of yowls.

"Justice!" Cried Dewstone uncharacteristically, tears welling in her fury-lit eyes. "Treeclan must be held responsible for this crime. We must attack!"
Swiftcloud couldn't believe what she was hearing. She'd never seen the Code Keeper act out like this. But an important memory popped into Swiftcloud's mind as she watched the scene unfold. Jaybird was Dewstone's mother; she had been the very first kit Jaybird ever adopted. It was no wonder she would be so angry. *I can't say I blame her.*

"Yes," Whitestar agreed with her warriors. "I see now that Treeclan will stop at nothing to take the Forest Patch back from us. We mustn't try being civial anymore, if this is what it comes to. Innocents being slaughtered... No more Grassclan cats shall needlessly die to settle scores. Instead, today, we shall finish this war! We will face Treeclan with everything we have, and settle this feud once and for all."

"Grassclan!" Gingerstrike roared. "Grassclan!"

"Grassclan! Grassclan! Grassclan!" Everyone else cheered along. Swiftcloud found her own voice lifting to join her clanmates, settling down as Whitestar swept her tail.

"Tigerfang, Swiftcloud, Gingerstrike. You will all accompany me to Treeclan's camp. We are going to have ourselves a little chat with those squirrel-kinning warriors. Come." The beautiful siamese she-

cat leapt from the Tall Stone to the grass below, already heading for the bramble tunnel. Swiftcloud pushed her way from the crowd, joining Tigerfang and Gingerstrike as they padded over to join with Whitestar. Chicorynose bid them farewell as they departed, the encouraging yowls of the clan going with them, fading the further the patrol traveled from the hill they lived upon.

The patrol padded far across the meadow, over the Twoleg bridge and towards the thick brush of the Forest Patch. They disregarded the scent markers entirely, marching onward with their intent to confront Treeclan. Today, even Swiftcloud paid no nevermind to their trespassing, of which she would always acknowledge whenever visiting the deeper part of the woods. Her mind was still too clouded with anger and grief for the loss of Jaybird. Sleep had barely helped to quell the anguish she felt. And the clan meeting this morning had only worked to rile her up more. Her head was buzzing like a hive full of bees. All she could focus on at the moment was getting to the bottom of this slaughter. And of all the other murders Treeclan had committed too.

Recently, I've spent so much time focusing on Snowfrost being a murderer, that I forgot all the blood Treeclan has shed, Swiftcloud realized. *But I won't let my priorities be muddled anymore. First, I'll help defeat Treeclan. Then I'll stop Snowfrost, before she strikes again.*

Swiftcloud was aware of why she was brought on the patrol today. Not only was she meant to prove they had come in peace, given that she was not a Fighting warrior. But she was also meant to act as a spy. Whitestar had not said so, but Swiftcloud was sure her job today was to look for evidence of Jaybird. She would look for clues, to see if the queen had been lured to the woods or brought against her will. Or to find out if she really had drowned in the river all on her own.

Deep down, Swiftcloud hoped Jaybird's death was merely an accident. Maybe the fur between her claws belonged to something she'd caught and eaten. And when she'd gone to quench her thirst, her paws slipped and she was sucked in by the current of the river. But Swiftcloud's instincts told her otherwise. The fur didn't look like it belonged to any sort of prey animal. It didn't seem like it could belong to a predator either, especially with no wounds to prove Jaybird had encountered one. The only other creature that could leave behind fur like that was a cat. It was a bit long, similar perhaps to a Treeclan warrior's pelt. It seemed only logical to

assume a cat from the enemy clan could have done this.
Unless my first theory was correct, Swiftcloud dreaded. *That would mean Snowfrost is responsible for this death too.* But Swiftcloud couldn't let herself bring this case on as evidence of the medicine cat's murderous wrath. It didn't fit Snowfrost's pattern. None of her other known victims had been killed violently. They'd all seized to death after taking some kind of poison. And Jaybird was Snowfrost's sister. Swiftcloud couldn't see Snowfrost wanting to cause harm to *any* of her kin. Even if they had argued. Even if they weren't close. Would Snowfrost really go so far? Was she even capable of killing with her own claws? Medicine cats barely had any warrior training. Just the bare minimum for self defense. Most were not very strong. But it wasn't hard to swipe at someone. And it certainly wouldn't be hard for a healer to know exactly where to claw to kill. Or to tell when a cat's swallowed enough water to stop them from breathing. Swiftcloud gulped at the thought, a shudder rippling through her body from nose to nubby tail-tip.
Gingerstrike suddenly paused as they walked, head erect and nose twitching. Swiftcloud snapped from her contemplation to focus on him, the rest of the patrol halting to join in.

"Wait-" He ordered, dashing off into the forest.
Swiftcloud exchanged a glance with Tigerfang, chasing after the wayward warrior. They found Gingerstrike settled down a shallow slope. Right by the edge of Treeclan's creek. His ruddy ginger body stood out against the murky blue-brown water rippling in the bank beside him. He was bent over, snout nearly scraping the silt below his paws.
"I smell Jaybird here. It's faint, but it's her scent." Gingerstrike looked up at his clanmates, eyes shining.

"How are you so sure?" Tigerfang questioned with a tail lash. He padded over to join the other warrior, sniffing at the creek shore with his nose crinkled.

"She was mates with my sister. Believe me, I know what Jaybird smells like. She was here. This is where she died."
Swiftcloud glanced around.

"No, wait," she interjected, padding over to a cat-sized indent in the sediment a mouse-length from the water's edge. Beside it were two

sets of paw prints. The tracks led both to and from this very spot from the top of the slope. "Look at this. I think this is where Jaybird's body must have been. There doesn't seem to be any signs of a struggle. No drag marks, except from the edge of the creek up to this spot. I think Treeclan might have been telling the truth!"

"We can't know that for sure. Jaybird could have been drowned on our territory and left for the river to claim. *And* it just so happens her body washed up here," Gingerstrike pointed out.

"Regardless," Whitestar chimed in as she met with her warriors on the shore, "we've already tested what was left of Blazestar's good will by attacking his warriors. Whether or not we can prove they killed Jaybird now means nothing. We must press on with our mission. We can't let ourselves be distracted anymore."

"I agree," Swiftcloud mewed, padding back up the slope. She tilted her head, motioning for her clanmates to come along. Whitestar, Tigerfang, and Gingerstrike followed, keeping up an even pace once the patrol had made it into the denser parts of the forest. They took their mandatory pause by the Thunder Path, crossing over it two by two before continuing onward. Eventually, the landscape began to slope once more, revealing the blackthorn barrier of Treeclan's camp.

Tigerfang was the first to make his way up into the Entrance Tree. Swiftcloud climbed up a heartbeat after, then Whitestar, and finally Gingerstrike protecting their rear. As they descended on the other side, the patrol's presence was noticed in an instant. Swiftcloud's pelt bushed with alarm at the sheer number of cats who'd turned to stare at them. It would seem Grassclan had intruded during a clan meeting. A time in which the whole of Treeclan was present. Tinystep and Batwing's ears flattened in distrust of the uninvited patrol. Silverhawk, Treeclan's former Den Mother, growled beside her adult kit, who looked an awful lot like Thornberry. His expression was sour, but anxiety glittered in his pale yellow eyes. Moonface and Sunflower whispered among themselves near the fresh-kill pile, eyeing Grassclan's warriors with worry. Across the camp, Magpietail emerged from the nursery to see what all the fuss was about. Smokecloud's kits had followed her out, their energy ripe with curiosity. One of them gasped at the sight of Gingerstrike,

their face lit like sunlight on water. They crouched to the leaf littered floor, ready to pounce their way over to the tom. But Magpietail held her tail out to stop them. She said something to them, something that could not be picked up from this distance, and a look of understanding bloomed on the kitten's face. Perhaps they had mistaken Gingerstrike for their other father, Oliver. Swiftcloud wasn't sure if the litter had met him yet. But judging by the kit's reaction to the ruddy tom, she guessed not.
Swiftcloud shot a glance towards Gingerstrike to see how he felt about the situation. He seemed to be upholding a neutral expression. But Swiftcloud could see a glint of amusement and pride shining in his eyes.
The most noticeable cat out of all among Treeclan's crowd was Blazestar. He sat tall upon the Great Stump, displeasure and annoyance prominent on his tense features.

"Grassclan warriors!" A warrior named Honeydrop cried out.

"How dare they set paw in our camp after what they've done!" Another, Fogbreath, snarled.

"Let them pass," a queen piped, gaining the attention of all her angered clanmates. That queen was Brightsky, Swiftcloud realized, Treeclan's current Den Mother. "They've clearly come to talk. Let's hear what they have to say."
Cats around the clearing murmured to one another, but no objections rung out. Eventually, the crowd parted down the middle to create a path upward to the Great Stump. Brightsky stepped out, dipping her head respectfully to the visitors. Then she turned, leading the Grassclan patrol forward as if they were kits about to be named. She moved aside gracefully once they'd reached their destination, seating herself beside her mate and deputy, Wolfheart. Whitestar stepped forward, Swiftcloud and Tigerfang pressed to either side of her. Gingerstrike protected them all from behind, glaring sharp thorns at the onlooking collective of Treeclan, daring them to try and harm his leader.

"Blazestar," Whitestar growled, tilting her head back to lock eyes with the other leader. "One too many of my warriors have perished because of this war. This needs to end now. Enough fooling around. We must fight; a winner must be declared at last."

"Indeed," Blazestar gave a dark grin. His tail curled, raising into the air. "I agree with you, Whitestar. Treeclan shall face off against Grassclan one last time; all or nothing. If you'd like, I'll even allow you an extra day to prepare." The Treeclan leader's tone was loud and arrogant, like he was goading Whitestar on for his own amusement. Or perhaps he was putting on a show for his warriors' sake. As Swiftcloud glanced around, she could tell Blazestar's clanmates were eager and excited to hear more about the finale to this moons old fued.

"And this fight will decide everything, yes? The fate of the border? Up to the Thunder Path?" Whitestar proposed. It would seem she was willing to play the firey tom's game. And all the cats, including Swiftcloud and her patrol, were eating it right up.

Blazestar gave a curt nod. "Or the entire forest. Depends on the winner."

"So be it," Whitestar agreed, dipping her head. Blazestar copied her movements, the leaders lifting their heads after a moment of pause. Treeclan erupted into a cheer, silenced quickly by a flick of Wolfheart's tail.

Whitestar lifted her head then turned, looking at each cat from her patrol. "Come, Grassclan. We must prepare."

Chapter 50

"Look, they've come back!" Lightpaw exclaimed as Whitestar and the rest of her patrol made their way into Grassclan's camp. At the young apprentice's call, the rest of the clan had begun to gather around, eager to hear news of what came from the meeting with Treeclan.

"Well? What did Blazestar have to say for himself?" Chicorynose asked, tail wagging with anxiety.

"We are to settle this war the day after tomorrow," Whitestar responded, body tense. Swiftcloud flanked one of her sides and could feel the leader's dread through her fur. It was almost overwhelming. If her clanmates were not pressed so closely around them, Swiftcloud would have withdrawn to calm herself.

"Which means we only have a short time to prepare," Chicorynose murmured, eyes darkening.

Whitestar nodded, looking at each of her warriors as she spoke. "For the rest of the day, up until sundown tomorrow, I want every able bodied cat to train. We must ensure our skills are sharp so that we may claim our victory."
And so that we don't lose any more warriors, Swiftcloud added in her mind, figuring the same thought might be running through Whitestar's. She gave the leader a glance, able to tell her prediction to be true by the turmoil on the other molly's siamese face.

"I'll send everyone out, then." Chicorynose turned, already prepared to order partners and apprentices to team up and get to work.

Swiftcloud and the others on her patrol had been dismissed from training for the evening. They'd be on a long journey, and Whitestar knew all too well the dread it had caused them all. Swiftcloud was grateful for the break, although she didn't allow her time to be wasted. She wanted her skills as sharp as the rest of the clan's, especially after being unconscious for three days.

Across the camp, Swiftcloud spotted one of her mates laying beside the fresh-kill pile. Shadowfang looked to be at peace, having a rest after being out at The Dip battle training with Quailbelly and Thornpaw. Swiftcloud almost felt bad to disturb him. But a mischievous idea crossed through her mind. One that she knew she couldn't pass up.

"Hey, Shadowfang?" she meowed, drawing her mate's attention as she padded over to him.

Shadowfang glanced up at Swiftcloud, gnawing on the leftovers from his dinner. He gave his lips a satisfied smack, then sat up straight to acknowledge the white and black patched she-cat. "Yeah?"

Swiftcloud smiled innocently, wiggling her nubby tail. Before Shadowfang could comment on her odd behavior, she threw herself onto him, mouthing at his ear and tugging on it playfully. She pushed with all of her strength, trying to flatten the him to the ground. Shadowfang squirmed beneath her, swinging his head side to side in an attempt to throw her off his back.

"Hey, quit it!" Shadowfang hissed, laughter in his voice. He rolled over a little, batting at Swiftcloud's whiskers. Swiftcloud growled at him playfully, leading to her being squashed by the larger cat's flank. Swiftcloud squealed, wiggling from beneath the black tom. She jumped up momentarily, allowing Shadowfang to spring to his paws. He turned, pouncing onto his mate so her could nibble on her shoulder, giving her ear a cuff. "Take that!"

"Foolish Shadowclan cat, I'll make crowfood of you!" Swiftcloud yowled dramatically.

"Foolish, am I?" Shadowfang played along. "That is where you're wrong. You'll never defeat me, Swiftstar. For I, Shadowstar, am the most powerful clan leader in the world!"

"We'll see about that!" Swiftcloud retorted, rolling onto her back. She kicked up at Shadowfang's underbelly, with claws sheathed, trying hard to throw him off of her. Shadowfang continued to nibble on her shoulder and neck, earning thrill filled squeals from

the patched molly. With one more effort filled kick, Swiftcloud managed to move Shadowfang from on top of her. She scrambled to get paws, darting away from the tom with a taunt. Shadowfang growled playfully, crouching to the floor. Her pelted after his mate a heartbeat later, gaining on her with ease. He pounced once more, tussling with her on the grassy floor. Squeaks and trills of laughter floated in the air between them as they rolled, their witty banter growing more and more dramatic. It felt good to play around with Shadowfang again like this. It reminded Swiftcloud of one of the reasons why she'd fallen in love with him. She enjoyed his playful spirit. Shadowfang never failed to make feel young and free. And though Swiftcloud was already both of these things, she knew that she'd truly felt this way whenever Shadowfang was around. To her, Shadowfang was joy; he was an adventure waiting to happen and a life full of experience. To Swiftcloud, Shadowfang was home.

"What in the name of the earth and stars are you two up to?" A voice called out to the playful mates, gaining both of their attention. Swiftcloud glanced at the cat who had spoken them, a bright smile blooming on her muzzle.

"Play fighting!" She chriped. "Care to join us, Misty?" She invited.

Mistyleaf shook her head, rolling her eyes playfully. "Silly furballs," she mewed as he booped Swiftcloud's nose, cuffing Shadowfang over the ear when he sat up. "How about we share tongues instead? Then you can tell Shadowfang and I all about your visit to Treeclan," Mistyleaf proposed.
Swiftcloud perked up the idea, agreeing without a second thought. The mates padded over to the edge of the clearing, entangling themselves with one another while they talked and groomed. During their chat, Swiftcloud's thoughts would wander. She realized while Shadowfang represented a life of freedom and fun, Mistyleaf stood for comfort. The silver molly was safety, trustworthiness, and softness. She was the calmness in the calamity. The voice of reason. To Swiftcloud, Mistyleaf was sanctuary. And together, both her and Shadowfang were the pure definition of love. Swiftcloud knew she could never adore any other cats more.
The moon soon climbed to its peak in the sky, summoning hard working warriors home, and putting them to sleep. Swiftcloud,

Shadowfang and Mistyleaf rose from their resting place padding into the warriors' den. They settled back down together in their shared nest, passing on wishes of good rest and sweet dreams before closing their eyes until morning light.

When dawn graced the clearing the following day, Chicorynose and Tigerfang were all too eager to rouse everyone in the clan from their collective slumber.

"Up, up, up! Let's get out there and work our tails off. We only have a short time left before the great battle!" Chicorynose caterwauled, earning a collection of groans. "I've already taken the liberty of gathering the apprentices in the clearing. Go and grab your 'Paws and partners, let's head out."

"I'll see you two later," Shadowfang said to the mollies in his nest. He stood up, giving his shoulder a few licks. "I'm gonna take Thornpaw and Lightpaw out to the Mountainclan border today, with Frostfeather and Pansypaw. Actually-- Swiftcloud, do you wanna come along with your apprentice?"

"No thanks, I already have plans to bring Tulippaw and Tabitha to The Dip today," Swiftcloud replied, standing with a stretch. Shadowfang shrugged, muttering out a "fair enough" before he padding out of the den.
Swiftcloud bid him an extra farewell, turning to groom Mistyleaf.

Mistyleaf purred gratefully, nudging Swiftcloud with her muzzle. "You should go too. And I've got to help Goldensong prepare herbs."

Swiftcloud whined slightly but ultimately agreed. She gave Mistyleaf one last lick on the cheek before heading out of the warriors' den, ready to get the day started. A chilly wind ruffled her short fur as she emerged into the open. Her pawpads tingled from the cold ground beneath them, making her take careful steps as she made her way over to her apprentices.
Tulippaw trilled as Swiftcloud approached, rushing forward to tuck her head under her mentor's chin.

"I missed you!" She practically yowled, a wetness pooling at the edges of her eyes as she pulled away to look at Swiftcloud.

Swiftcloud purred, licking the younger molly between the ears. She was well aware that Tulippaw had caught wind of the lie Snowfrost told. That Swiftcloud might not last the next quarter moon. Tulippaw had already lost one mentor. Though they were not close, Ambereye's death had still effected her. Starclan only knew how broken Tulippaw would become if anything ever happened to Swiftcloud. Luckily, Swiftcloud had no plans on dying any time soon. She was healthy again, and strong. She was determined to prove that to the brown and white she-cat. To give her the reassurance she needed.

"Alright, 'Paws, let's head out," Chicorynose meowed as she padded over to the apprentices. She turned, noticing the other she-cat besides the group. "Oh Swiftcloud! Are you tagging along?"

"I was actually planning on taking the apprentices myself today," she mewed in response. It has been a while since she had gotten to train Tulippaw. And she hadn't gotten the chance to assess Tabitha's skills just yet.

"Oh really? Where were you planning to go?"

"The Dip," Swiftcloud explained her idea for the day. She was willing to go into greater detail, if it meant she could convince Chicorynose to let her have the apprentices.

"What a coincidence! That's where I had planned to take them. How about we all go together then?" Chicorynose proposed. Swiftcloud thought about it for a heartbeat, agreeing to the plan rather quickly. It had been some moons since she'd been out training with her own mentor. And though she had graduated from her apprentice training, she still appreciated any lessons Chicorynose would still give. Tulippaw and Tabitha seemed excited by the plan, racing over to the bramble tunnel ahead of the warriors. Swiftcloud and Chicorynose chased after them, rushing to keep up as they made their way across the meadow. The wind grew more bitter as they hurried along, making Swiftcloud pray for the fresh warmth of Newleaf to grace the Land's Star sooner rather than later. Eventually, the Dip came into their line of sight. It welcomed the Grassclan cats to its sandy center as they made their way down it's steep slopes. The walls of The Dip provided some shelter from the

wind as the four mollies settled within the heart of it. Swiftcloud was grateful for the protection and knew she'd feel warmer just as soon as they would begin training.

"You're in charge today, Swiftcloud. Let's see what kind of training regimen you've got set up for these two hyperactive apprentices," Chicorynose commented.
Swiftcloud nodded, looking at each young cat in turn. She thought for a moment about the best course of action before speaking; "Tulippaw, you and Chicorynose will spar first. Afterwards, I'll be assessing Tabitha's skills. Then the two of you will practice some advanced techniques together, while Chicorynose and I train."

"Awesome!!" Tulippaw perked up at the chance to show off her skills. Tabitha and Swiftcloud shuffled off to the sidelines, keeping away from all the action that was about to unfold. Swiftcloud watched Chicorynose pad across the ditch, turning tail to face her opponent. Tulippaw stepped close to the center, eyes narrowed to focus on the other cat in front of her.

"Alright, Tulip, give me everything you've got." The deputy challenged.

Instantly Tulippaw dropped into a crouch, flexing her claws in excitement. Chicorynose mirrored her stance, stalking the apprentice around the base of The Dip, ready to pounce or defend at any given moment. Tulippaw watched her aunt carefully, eyeing her legs specifically. Chicorynose took notice and dropped down to protect herself, probably thinking she'd already bested the warrior in training.
Be careful of your line of sight; never give away your target with your glance, Swiftcloud was prepared to say, waiting for the apprentice to try and sweep her faux enemy's feet from under her.
But the attack never came. Instead, Tulippaw leaped without warning, springing onto Chicorynose's back. She scraped her paws against the older molly's flanks with sheathed claws, yowling out a battle cry. She'd managed to throw Chicorynose off her guard.
Well done.
Chicorynose fought to get Tulippaw off her back, gaining the upper paw for half a heartbeat when Tulippaw willing let her go. But as the brown and white molly's front paws touched the ground, she

turned, kicking her back legs out. This pushed Chicorynose forward, knocking off her balance. She struggled to keep herself from toppling, widening her stance to catch herself. Tulippaw turned once more to smirk.

"Not bad," Chicorynose praised. Without another word she surged forward, swiping at Tulippaw's face. She changed paws every few heartbeats in an attempt to distract the apprentice. Tulippaw did her best to dodge the blows, getting hit once or twice. Though she managed to maneuver or block most of them. But Swiftcloud knew Chicorynose didn't really care whether Tulippaw took damage from her attack. What she was really after was backing her opponent into a corner. It was a technique Swiftcloud knew well, having been subjected to it often during her own apprentice training. Tulippaw took a pace away each time Chicorynose swiped. Eventually, she ended up with her rear pinned again The Dip's wall. Chicorynose took this oppurtunity to pounce, slamming her body into Tulippaw's. Tulippaw hit the wall with a thud, sliding against it as she collapsed on the floor. She wasn't injured-Chicorynose would never have hit Tulippaw that hard-but the impact was enough to throw her off her paws. The deputy then set herself upon the younger she-cat, effectively pinning her. After struggling to get out of her aunt's grip, Tulippaw finally went limp in defeat.

"Great try," Swiftcloud purred as Chicorynose let Tulippaw sit up. She padded over to her apprentice, nubby tail held high. "Yknow you almost had her for a heartbeat. But you weren't paying much attention to your surroundings. A Grassclan warrior must always be aware of what's going on around them, from the ground to the sky. Many predators and cats will try to take advantage of you by attacking from unexpected directions. Or by tricking you into a spot you can't escape from. You have to always be guarded, and clever. Other than that, your blows hit hard, which is good, and your fighting stance is almost flawless. I'm very proud of your progress. You're going to be great tomorrow."

Tulippaw beamed, her glee as bright as the Greenleaf sun. She stood to shake some dust from her pelt, then gave a little bounce. "Do you think I'll make a good warrior someday?" She asked hopefully.

"'Good?' No." Swiftcloud smirked. "I bet you're going to be one of the greatest warriors Grassclan's ever known. With enough training you'll end up being the best Fighter. If that's the job you choose to have. And you're already a very good hunter!"
Tulippaw giggled, giving her mentor a lick on the shoulder respectfully.
Swiftcloud turned. "Alright, Tabitha, it's your turn now. Let's see what Chicorynose has taught you recently."

"Really?" Tabitha seemed unsure. "But I thought I didn't have to fight in the battle tomorrow?"

"Of course you don't. But it's always good to test your skills. Even without your claws, you need to know how to defend yourself. If not for anyone else's sake, then for the kits and queens."

"For the kits and queens... Alright, I'll give it a try." Tabitha padded to the middle of The Dip, trading places with Tulippaw. She didn't seem nervous, despite previous hesitation. But she certainly seemed uncomfortable. Tulippaw wrapped her tail around Tabitha's briefly, giving it a reassuring shake before she moved to settle at the edge of The Dip besides Chicorynose.
Chicorynose lifted a forepaw to wrap around the apprentice's neck, pulling her close to her fluffy chest. With her free paw, she rubbed her niece's head playfully, earning yowls of protest as the young cat struggled to get away.
Swiftcloud chuckled seeing the two of them play, directing her attention back onto Tabitha soon after. She decided she would be taking it easy on the pregnant apprentice. But not enough to where she would be unable to learn. And certainly not to a point where Tulippaw may assume the queen was being coddled.

"Ready?" Swiftcloud checked as she watched the plump queen drop into a fighting stance.

Tabitha nodded curtly. "Whenever you are."

Swiftcloud dashed off from her spot immediately as the challenge began, running around Tabitha, trying to use her weight against her. Her growing belly made her slow, which granted Swiftcloud a bit of an advantage. Tabitha swung around to keep up, kicking out

a back leg in order to defend herself. She managed to land a hit, shoving Swiftcloud away by a mouse-length. Then she turned like a snake, baring her fangs as if to warn her enemy of her sharp bite. Swiftcloud rushed ahead without hesitation, throwing a front paw blow at the plump brown and white tabby. Tabitha caught Swiftcloud's paw in her mouth, biting down on it and pulling her second mentor closer to herself. Swiftcloud let out an astonished shriek, finding herself crushed beneath Tabitha's weight as she was pulled closer to her body. Swiftcloud swung wildly beneath the apprentice, hitting her with her paws in a mock scratch. Tabitha's heft pressed her opponent harder against the earth, her teeth fastening themselves into Swiftcloud's scruff. When the warrior had tired herself out, the training queen pulled her out from under herself, throwing the patched molly across The Dip with little effort. Swiftcloud narrowly avoided hitting the opposite wall, skidding to a half just a whisker-length in front of it. She smirked over at Tabitha, panting to catch her breath.

"You're a fast learner," she remarked, recalling how little time the apprentice queen had been part of the clan.

Tabitha lifted her head proudly. "With two of the clan's best warriors as my mentors, it's easy for me to learn."

"I think that's enough sparring for you two today," Chicorynose meowed, stepping forward. "Why don't you go practice some moves with Tulippaw now, Tabitha? I think my old apprentice may need a refresher course in the meantime."

Swiftcloud perked at the deputy's comment, an excited smile blooming on her muzzle. She did feel a little embarrassed, being beaten by a cat who'd only been training for a moon. She was more than happy to take on another lesson by her beloved mother figure. "Yeah!"

Tabitha and Chicorynose traded off, ready to face their new opponents without apprehension. Swiftcloud immediately dropped into a stance, bracing herself for whatever the deputy may throw at her.
The four mollies trained until the sun began to dip towards the horizon. Their bodies ached from a successful day of working by the

time they climbed from the confines of the Dip. Swiftcloud was confident that the group was prepared for what tomorrow's battle may bring. But for the time being, all she would let herself focus on was getting home and resting. Worrying about the war's end could wait for her until sunrise.

Chapter 51

Sunhigh the following day was fast approaching. Warriors were gathered in the clearing, feasting upon freshly caught prey. Hardly a whisper was passed among them; tension heavy in the air. Swiftcloud sat between her mates Shadowfang and Mistyleaf, sharing a rabbit. To say she was nervous was an understatement. Today would be the deciding factor on who would keep the rights to the Forest Patch. A prime hunting area, especially in Leafbare, at least for Grassclan. If they were to lose today, the clan would suffer greatly. And if they were to win? Though they would gain more territory, it could potentially cost more lives. Every cat would be giving their all today, as evident of the sheer amount of cats joining the patrol. Every capable warrior was going to fight; queens, and apprentices included. How many of these cats would Swiftcloud be seeing for the last time? How many more would come home bloodied and broken over a petty feud?

She glanced over at Shadowfang. His expression was serious, gaze distance as he chewed a piece from their shared prey. Swiftcloud wondered what he might be thinking about.

Her attention shifted to her left to focus on Mistyleaf. She was pressed completely against Swiftcloud, tail-tip twitching nervously. She seemed to be mumbling herbs names and their uses under her breath. She'd barely touched any of the rabbit. Swiftcloud felt bad for her. Normally Mistyleaf would stay behind in camp during raids with Goldensong. Today though, Whitestar had ordered her to assist Snowfrost on the front lines. Swiftcloud worried most for them. Though it was against clan law to harm or kill a medicine cat, it would be easy to mistake an idle healer as an enemy warrior. In the heat of battle, a warrior doesn't usually waste time considering who's who among their opponents. They attack first, ask questions later. If Treeclan's warriors were careless, they could easily slay Mistyleaf or Snowfrost. That frightened Swiftcloud to her core. Silently she swore to herself that she would be keeping an eye on her medicine cat mate as she fought with all her might against cats who might dare threaten her life. And with Shadowfang at her side, Swiftcloud could be sure her other mate would be protected.

Whitestar called out from atop the Tall stone. At once, every cat turned their attention onto her. "Sunhigh approaches. Our greatest battle begins now. Stand strong, my warriors. Stay close to your partners, and look out for one another. We are strong. Together, we shall defeat Treeclan and claim our victory!"

"Grassclan!" Chicorynose caterwauled loudly, encouraging her clan.

"Grassclan! Grassclan! Grassclan!" Everyone cheered along, standing as one unit and walking to the bramble tunnel. One by one Grassclan's warriors and apprentices slipped out into the meadow, bounding over many hills and across the Twoleg bridge. Not a whisper passed among them, not even a whimper or a growl. Every cat remained poised and ready for a fight. Their muscles were tight, strengthened by the previous day's training. Everyone looked confident in their collective mission. Even Swiftcloud felt assured, though her usual anxiousness still hung at the back of her mind. *It's an honor to serve my clan. Even if I die today, I know I'll do so aiding in our victory.* Swiftcloud glanced at her clanmates surrounding her, feeling a smile pull at her lips. Despite the looming danger they were about to face, she felt safe here among the clan. Like this was where she was meant to be.
As they came upon the Forest Patch, Grassclan's movements began to slow. Cats drew closer to one another; partner finding partner. Eventually, they formed a line, standing perfectly along the border as they waited for their enemy to arrive. Most turned their sights towards the treetops. Swiftcloud, however, kept her line of sight forward. A few tense heartbeats passed before she began to hear the thudding pawsteps of many cats approaching.

"Look," she breathed, gaining the clan's attention. All eyes fell back upon the border as a row of bulky warriors approached. Swiftcloud felt herself tense in Treeclan's presence, her legs beginning to tremble from anticipation. The moment they'd all been waiting for had finally dawned upon them. The war would end today. Right here. Right now.
This is what being a warriors is about. We can do this. Grassclan is the greatest clan among the Land's Star. Today, we will prove that.

"Whitestar," Blazestar called out as he made his way out in front of his clan. "This is your last chance to surrender the Forest Patch

peacefully. Admit your defeat; apologize for your clan's wrongdoings, and go home quietly. There is no need for battle this day."

Whitestar stepped up, standing face to face with her fellow leader. Their noses were only a mouse-length apart, eyes locked upon one another. There was an air of seriousness surrounding Whitestar this day; an anger the likes of which Swiftcloud had never seen the she-cat possess before.
"Normally, I would agree with you, Blazestar. But that is not the way of a warrior. Too many of my clan have died at the paws of yours unnecessarily. We've come not only for the forest, but to avenge our fallen. And to restore our honor. Grassclan is a nobel clan. We've not done the things you have accused of us for so many moons. Today, we prove that. Not with words, but with tooth and claw. After all, it seems that's all Treeclan understands anymore."

Blazestar's ears drew back, his teeth baring with a snarl. "Then suffer for your choice....Treeclan, attack!"
Treeclan's warriors launched themselves forward at the leader's call, pelts bristling, fury lighting their eyes.

"Grassclan!" Whitestar cried, flicking her tail. At once the clan surged from behind her, countering the enemy across the border. Battle cries and caterwauls rang out like thunder as claws met fur and teeth met skin.
Swiftcloud and Shadowfang joined their clanmates in the brawl, each taking on a warrior double their size. Shadowfang had himself latched to the shoulders of Galestorm, a large gray she-cat with a bad attitude. While Swiftcloud found herself coming to blows with Smokecloud. She tried her best not to harm the tom too severely--they were friends after all--but she still needed to wound him enough to send him fleeing. She threw front paw blows left and right at his face, scratching at his nose and eyes in order to make him flinch. Smokecloud yowled, raising his own paws to blindly flail at the smaller she-cat. One good smack in the jaw sent Swiftcloud reeling backwards. A metallic taste caught on her tongue as she swiped it along her lips. Smokecloud had managed to cut her good. Swiftcloud growled, throwing herself onto the bulky tom to bite at his scruff. She sunk her teeth into his thick pelt, holding

until she felt them meet delicate flesh.

"Let go!" Smokecloud coughed as she pulled on him. Swiftcloud growled at the smokey tom in response, shaking herself violently to rough him up some more until she heard him begin to whimper. Smokecloud backed away as soon as he was let go, turning tail to flee.

"Don't let him get away that easy!" Shadowfang told her. Swiftcloud gave an agreeing nod, pursuing the fluffy smoke tom through the forest. As they ran, Swiftcloud could see more and more of her clanmates driving the enemy towards the Thunder Path, where Grassclan hoped to set the new border. *If we can drive Treeclan out from that point, we can solidify our claim on the Forest Patch.* Swiftcloud let out a yowl, slamming her flank into Smokecloud's to push him closer to the black stone river. Smokecloud collapsed just by the edge, his sides heaving with effort. Swiftcloud let out one last snarl before the tom rushed across to the other side, finally safe from the Grassclan warrior's wrath deep in the forest beyond the battlefield. Swiftcloud watched in his direction for a moment more before turning tail, rejoining Shadowfang as he too chased his opponent across the Thunder Path.

"How's Mistyleaf?" Swiftcloud asked as she stood beside him, taking this brief moment to catch her breath.

"She's doing good. Last I saw, she was by our border still. Frostfeather was with her," Shadowfang replied, tearing some fur out from his front claws.

"Not Snowfrost?"

"I think she might be out somewhere on the battlefield, healing wounds. I'm sure she's alright though. Don't worry. Let's get back out there, yeah?"

Swiftcloud wasn't worried about Snowfrost being hurt. What she was more concerned about was the medicine cat using this battle as an opportunity to kill again. The thought was overwhelming. But Swiftcloud forced herself to push the fear aside for the time being.

"Yeah," she agreed as she flanked her mate. The two pelted away from the Thunder Path, seeking new opponents to prey on. Around them, the battle raged on. Tensions were high and every cat was giving their all.
Slugsnout and Snailear were fighting against Treeclan senior warriors, Robinspots and Flamepath. The brothers passed their opponents off to each other, tearing their pelts before switching enemies again. Pansypaw fended off Scarletpaw, while Tulippaw cleaned a wound on her flank that had gotten dirty. The brown and white she-cat turned a heartbeat later, knocking the Treeclan apprentice onto her side to relieve Pansypaw from her fight.
A bear-length off, Tigerfang was crouched beneath Wolfheart, pressed down by the larger warrior's weight. With a hard kick of his back leg, the dark brown tabby managed to knock the Treeclan deputy off of him. Wolfheart staggered backwards, catching himself just before Tigerfang turned, lunging for his enemy. Wolfheart rose up on his hind paws to meet him, catching the Grassclan warrior as he came crashing into his body.
Swiftcloud turned her head, spotting Whitestar just a short way off. She was wrestling Blazestar on the ground, trying to get the upper paw against him. The two leaders rolled over one another, shredding fur and drawing blood. Out of the corner of her eye, Swiftcloud saw Blazestar raise a paw with claws outstretched. They glinted white in the light of the setting sun just as they swung back down, straight across Whitestar's throat.

"No!" Swiftcloud cried, wrenching herself in the direction of her leader.

Shadowfang held her back by her scruff. "Whitestar will be fine! This is what Starclan has given her nine lives for. We need to keep ourselves focused," he reasoned.
Swiftcloud trembled in place, watching her leader's still form for a heartbeat until she saw her start to breathe and move once more. Blazestar was waiting for Whitestar to revive from losing a life, but made no move to attack until he was sure she had recovered. Swiftcloud relaxed slightly, if only because she knew now that Treeclan's leader would fight fairly. She turned to Shadowfang and gave him a nod, following him once again into the throng of cats around them.

Swiftcloud spotted Sunflower in the crowd closer to the Grassclan border, thrashing the inexperienced apprentice, Lightpaw, against a tree. Though she was large for an apprentice, inheriting her size from Whitestar, it was clear she barely knew what she was doing. Lightpaw should be facing another apprentice, not a seasoned warrior. Anger surged through Swiftcloud, forcing her to pull away from Shadowfang once again. She launched herself at Sunflower blindly, swiping at his muzzle to knock him off her clanmate. Lightpaw stared at Swiftcloud in awe.

"Take her to see Mistyleaf!" Swiftcloud commanded her mate as she fended off the enemy tom. Shadowfang gave a nod, helping Lightpaw limp across the border in search of the medicine cat. Sunflower snarled at Swiftcloud, fangs bared as he tried biting her limbs. Swiftcloud maneuvered away from the tom, arching her back, challenging him to come face a real warrior. Sunflower did not move. He merely stared, eyes dark. A smirk pulled up the corners of his mouth, leaving Swiftcloud confused.

"Watch out!" A cat yowled from behind her. Swiftcloud whipped around, ears flattening against her head as she saw the large body of Tigerlily leaping down at her from above. Rabbitstorm jumped out to intercept her midair, knocking Tigerlily onto her flank with a loud and painful thud. The large tabby and white she-cat yowled up at him wildly as Rabbitstorm reeled back a paw to strike her.

"Fox-dung!" Sunflower cursed. Swiftcloud whipped back around to face him once more. The tom hissed at her, throwing himself at her in an attempt to knock the white and black patched she-cat off her paws. Swiftcloud stumbled, finding her footing. She shook her head then stood up onto her hind paws, falling back down onto Sunflower. Sunflower squirmed beneath her weight, clawing at her flanks as he rolled beneath her belly. Swiftcloud grabbed him by the scruff, pulling him from beneath her. She threw him, slamming the ginger and white tom into the trunk of a nearby tree. Sunflower rose back onto shaky paws, his eyes wide as Swiftcloud approached again. He let out a whimper as he weakly turned, scampering off into the woods. Swiftcloud gave chase, wanting to ensure he was gone for good.
The pair quickly approached the slope which led to the Thunder

Path. Sunflower turned once more, giving a last ditch effort of attack before he would surrender to his enemy. He charged at Swiftcloud, pushing her onto her back. The tom's sharp claws scraped against her delicate belly and chest, drawing blood from the wounds he made. Swiftcloud cried out in pain, but refused to admit defeat. With all her might she pulled herself upwards, locking her teeth around Sunflower's throat. She bit down, keeping a strong grip. But Swiftcloud made sure she was careful; she didn't want to kill her enemy.
Sunflower let out a strangled noise, wiggling in the Grassclan warrior's grasp. Swiftcloud whipped around, throwing the ginger tom away towards the Thunder Path. Sunflower rose to his paws, scrambling across the black stone path in a flurry of ripped fur and scarlet droplets. Swiftcloud let out a pant, licking her lips clean of the tom's blood. She nearly gagged at the amount; she wasn't at all fond of cat blood. But spilling some was necessary in battle, especially in the biggest battle of her life.
Around her, the land began to slim of cats as more were sent fleeing across the Thunder Path for good. Grassclan had the upper paw now, and as the moments passed, it became easier to spot her clanmates.
Across the way Swiftcloud caught a glimpse of a familiar fawn pelt laying on the ground unmoving. Green eyes caught onto her blues, making the young warrior's blood run cold.

"Chicorynose!" Swiftcloud scrambled to her paws, rushing to her former mentor's side; praying to Starclan that she was not too late. She came to a screeching halt by the deputy's flank, focus locking onto her face and neck.
Chicorynose had her jaws parted as she panted weakly, looking up at her former apprentice with tears. A sick gurgle came with every breath, blood dripping from the molly's mouth. Her beautiful fluffy neck fur was saturated, stained dark red. Beneath her a lake of blood had formed. Chicorynose's throat had been slit, and she was fading fast. A bubble of sadness burst in the pit of Swiftcloud stomach, forcing sobs from her throat and a tremble in her legs. *No, Starclan no! Not Chicorynose. Please!*

"Sw-Swift.." Chicorynose gasped out. Swiftcloud moved herself closer to the molly's face.

"I'm here, Chicorynose, I'm here! Pl-please don't die..! Please! I'll get some help. You..you're going to be just fine!"

Chicorynose forced a weak smirk to tug up the corner of her lip. Her voice was incredibly weak and raspy as she began to speak, coming out more as a gulp than a whisper. "I'm..I'm so..proud..of you. You know that...right?"

Swiftcloud nodded, tears streaming down her face. She dipped her head, pressing her nose into Chicorynose's cheek. The deputy's scent flooded her nostrils, filling Swiftcloud with warmth and comfort even in such a terrible moment.

"You are a great..cat...I am so happy to have..trained you..to have known you. To have loved you as..as if you were..my own...." Chicorynose's eyes began to dull, like a fire simmering down into embers.

Swiftcloud hiccuped, "I love you, mom...." She buried her nose that much deeper into Chicorynose's fur. "Please don't die..."

"It's my..time...Starclan calls. The Twilight Passage.. awaits me.. for judgement."

"It shouldn't have to be your time!" The wail came unexpectedly, but Swiftcloud could not help it. A fresh wave of grief crashed over her like the ocean against the shore, rough and salty. Her head shot up suddenly, taking in the bloodied sight of the cat she'd come to know as deputy, mentor, friend, and mother. "Who could have done this to you?!"

"Snow..." Chicorynose's voice was hardly above a whisper now.

"W-who..?" Swiftcloud strained to hear, breath held in anxious anticipation.

"Snow...frost."

Swiftcloud's blood turned ice cold. She stared down at Chicorynose, stiff like stone, as a new sensation came over her. Realization. Swiftcloud had been right all along.

"Swiftcloud." Chicorynose coughed, grabbing the young cat's attention instantly. "Be good. Take..care of..the clan."

Swiftcloud whimpered, nuzzling her face against the fawn molly's muzzle.

"I will," she promised. Gradually the rise and fall of Chicorynose's chest slowed, and with one last shaky breath, the deputy was still. Swiftcloud shook violently the moment she felt her mentor slip away, her face pressing that much harder against the deputy's. She needed to take in every last flea trace of her scent before it was gone forever. Like Chicorynose was. Luckily, Swiftcloud knew exactly who to blame now. She would have justice for Chicorynose, even if it was the last she'd do.
A twig snapped a foxlength away, making Swiftcloud raise her head. The sweet and nauseating smell of lavender wafted around her as she stared ahead. Snowfrost was standing before her, head elevated, eyes narrowed to bitter icy slits. Her right paw, once silver and striped, was now stained red with blood. Her claws which were unsheathed revealing them to be painted the same.
At once, white hot fury took over Swiftcloud's vision, sending her into a frenzy. She let out a fierce cry, a wretched mix of a wail and a yowl and threw herself at Snowfrost.

"*Murderer!*" She caterwauled so loud her voice echoed through the trees. Snowfrost managed to dodge her, slipping from beneath the younger she-cat just as she was about to land. She let out a grotesque hiss, arching her back as Swiftcloud turned tail to face her once more. Swiftcloud rushed towards the medicine cat again, being met by claws swiping for her face. Blood welled around Swiftcloud's left eye, forcing it shut as the liquid trickled down. Pain seared her flesh, but the sensation felt dull compared to her heartbreak. She would not allow such a small wound to stop her, not now, not while Chicorynose's killer was still right here in front of her. A quick shake of her head brought Swiftcloud's senses back. "I knew you were no good," She snarled. "I'm going to make the whole clan see what a monster you are!"

At once, Snowfrost let out a viscous yowl, throwing herself at Swiftcloud, bowling her over. The mollies tussled around on the ground, biting and scratching, each trying to one up the other.

Snowfrost aimed for Swiftcloud's injured eye and shoulder, trying to disable her, leave her weak. But Swiftcloud had moons of training under her pelt, giving her the strength to withstand the attack despite the pain.

"You should have died when I fed you that mouse! You should be dead just like Chicorynose, just like all the others!" Snowfrost sneered, creating a new rush of ferocity within the warrior. Swiftcloud put all of her weight into rolling them over, forcing Snowfrost onto her back. She pinned the medicine cat down, one paw against a shoulder, another against her throat. Her back paws pressed down into Snowfrost's lower half; a paw against her exposed belly, the fourth stopping her back legs. The medicine cat was completely immobile, but Swiftcloud wasn't satisfied. Her ears drew back as she stared down at the medicine cat, teeth bared in a snarl. One of her paws lifted slowly, claws unsheathing.

"Swiftcloud!"

Chapter 52

"*Swiftcloud!*" The voice called again, sounding like an echo in her ears. Swiftcloud hardly reacted, remaining as stiff as an icicle. Was it her mind? Was it a Starclan warrior yowling at her to stop?

"Swiftcloud!" The third time the voice sounded, Swiftcloud broke from her rage. The world, once blurry and distant, came rushing back into her vision in vibrant color. Blinking, the patched she-cat turned her head. She took notice of her clanmates surrounding her now, wide eyed and bristling. Whitestar stood closest of all, a paw raised to her chest in shock. Instantly Swiftcloud's blood ran cold, fear tightening her chest. It had been the leader's voice which had been calling her name. The situation must look bad. Swiftcloud was standing on top of Grassclan's eldest medicine cat, ready to strike her without mercy. Without proper context it must look like she was trying to kill Snowfrost in cold blood. Like she was the clan's murderer all along. When the opposite was true. Oh how Swiftcloud knew it was true. *I'm in trouble...*
What would happen now, Swiftcloud wondered. Harming a medicine cat was an incredibly serious offense. Surely Grassclan would not want to keep her among their ranks. They'd never believe that she only attacked Snowfrost to avenge their fallen deputy; after all, what proof did she have? *I'm probably about to be exiled; stripped of my warriorship and sent running back to Twolegplace. Or worse...I'll be executed!*

"I can't believe you've done this..." Whitestar hissed, voice barely above a whisper. Her pale blue eyes shone with fury, a layer of grief masked behind her expression. Swiftcloud shrank in place, but did not dare to step off of Snowfrost. "It took so long for the clan to trust you. Yet you've betrayed us, after everything we've done for you."

Swiftcloud gulped, wanting to disappear. She tried her best to keep her trembling at bay but she knew the clan could probably tell how scared she was by scent alone. *This is it...*

"I knew we shouldn't have accepted you. And I knew...I knew I should have trusted Swiftcloud more."
Huh?!
"Guards, seize Snowfrost."

Rabbitstorm and Beetlepatch came marching forward at once, expressions stone cold and serious.

"Step aside," Rabbitstorm commanded his friend softly. Swiftcloud remained still, unsure if she could even move at all. Slowly she tested her limbs, making each take a couple of pawsteps back until she realized that she had moved completely off of Snowfrost. Rabbitstorm seized the medicine cat by the scruff while Beetlepatch gripped her carefully on the other side.

"Bring Snowfrost back to camp so we may hold a trial to decide her fate. Sheeptail and Tigerfang, carry Chicorynose home with us. Cricketsong, Quailbelly, Swiftcloud, please join me at the head of the patrol."

At once, cats moved into formation, standing behind Whitestar as she waited for her sisters and Swiftcloud to stand beside her.

"Let go of me you rabbit-brains!" Snowfrost demanded with a snarl, trying to wiggle out of the guards' grasp. Rabbitstorm and Beetlepatch gripped harder, tugging her in the direction of home. After another heartbeat of hesitation, Swiftcloud scurried over to Whitestar, still on edge. Whitestar glanced at her with a sad smile as they stood side by side, waving her tail and marching forward. The clan followed, soft chatter rippling through the patrol. On the opposite side of their leader, Swiftcloud could hear the heartbroken sobs of Cricketsong and Quailbelly, who pressed into one another as they traveled. Whitestar leaned into Cricketsong for support, and Swiftcloud found herself pressing her flank in the siamese molly's other side.

"Whitestar..?" Swiftcloud piped quietly. Whitestar glanced at her, humming in response. "You..believe I wasn't attacking Snowfrost maliciously?"

"Yes. For the most part, the clan and I saw what happened."

"H-how?"

"We heard you yowl and came over to see what had happened. Cricketsong was the first to notice the blood covering Snowfrost. And I knew you would never attack a cat without purpose." Swiftcloud gave a small nod, turning her sights forward. The tremble had not left her body but relief came with Whitestar's words.
"I'm sorry that I did not believe you before. I did not want to mistrust a medicine cat. And I did not want to make an accusation without proper evidence."

"It's ok, Whitestar. I'm just grateful that you finally understand."

"As am I. Though I wish I had, before things had escalated to this point. All the destruction Snowfrost has caused...I wonder what other horrible things she's done over the moons."

The remainder of the clan who'd been left in the camp-the kits, Tabitha and Ashwhisker- were awaiting the patrol as they entered the clearing. They seemed eager to find out what the outcome of the battle had been. But when they caught a glimpse of the three distraught sisters, their expressions turned with worry.

"Have we lost?" Ashwhisker asked, voice flat and defeated. Swiftcloud straightened up to speak.

"No. Grassclan won the war, and we've marked the new border along the Thunder Path."

"But..?" Ashwhisker already knew there had to be more news.

"....We lost Chicorynose."

Ashwhisker's eyes widened, ears lowering. "To whom?"

Just as the question passed his lips, Rabbitstorm entered the camp, dragging Snowfrost along with him. Swiftcloud nodded towards the guilty she-cat, eyes darkening at the sight of her. Ashwhisker let out a growl, the fur along his spine rising.

"I knew we could never trust that fox-heart."

Swiftcloud was surprised by the Den Mother's words. Why did he feel that way? What part of Snowfrost's past had led so many in the clan to dislike her? Swiftcloud was tempted to ask, but held back her tongue. Perhaps she'd find out during the trial. If not, she'd be free to ask afterwards.
Swiftcloud brought herself over to the gathering crowd by Tall Stone. She sat herself near the center of her clan, settling into Shadowfang's side. Shadowfang gave her a loud reassuring purr, licking some of the blood off of the top of her muzzle while they waited for Whitestar to arrive.
Whitestar scaled slowly to the top of Tall Stone, her movements sluggish from fatigue and grief. A heavy weight set itself upon her shoulders. Though the clan gained it's full claim on the Forest Patch, they had lost something greater than territory.

"Today, Grassclan has achieved it's greatest accomplishment in years. After many hard battles, and a long bloody war, our clan has won the right to the Forest Patch up to the Thunder Path! This means a bright future for generations of our clan to come. But today is not all victorious. For this evening we have lost a very important and beloved member of our clan."
As Whitestar spoke these words, Goldensong and Mistyleaf brought Chicorynose out from the medicine den. Her body had been decorated with mint leaves to mask her death scent, her fur neatly groomed and fixed of any visible battle wounds.
"Chicorynose fought bravely in today's battle. And though I'd like to announce she died with the honor of a warrior, I'm saddened and sickened to say she has been taken from us for unjust means. Chicorynose has been slain in cold blood, and I shall see to it that her murderer faces justice. However, my focus cannot remain on that for this moment."
Whitestar stepped forward onto the edge of the Tall Stone, her eyes scanning the crowd as she continued with her speech. "As moon high approaches, it is time that I choose a new deputy. Chicorynose served us well for many seasons; from the moment I earned my nine lives. I have never thought of ruling without her by my side.... But I know that the cat who I shall choose will lead with me just as faithfully, and will make a fine leader of this clan in the future."
Cats among the crowd murmured to each other softly, everyone wondering who Whitestar may choose as her heir.

"I say these words before the body of Chicorynose, so that her spirit may hear and approve my choice..."
The clan drew just a bit closer to the leader, waiting with baited breath as she thought for a heartbeat more about her decision.
"Swiftcloud. Will you accept the position of deputy?"
Me..? Swiftcloud's fur bristled at the sound of her name, her skin lighting ablaze with heat. *She* had been the one chosen as the clan's next deputy? She was shocked to say the least. Nervous, excited, apprehensive, bewildered. But honored, surely and purely. Swiftcloud was more than happy to serve Grassclan as it's second in command, leading them and protecting them with every breath in her body. But was she really the right choice? Surely there were many cats who were more worthy of the position. Swiftcloud could name several off the top of her head. What made her so special that she could even compare to anyone else?
Swiftcloud stared up at Whitestar with wide eyes, unable to find the words she needed to give a proper answer to the leader's proposal. As she looked on, the moon reached it's peak in the sky, casting it's light straight upon Tall Stone. The moon made Whitestar's creamy siamese fur glow with divinity, her essence seeming to radiate the energy Starclan had granted her for the ceremony.
For a heartbeat, in the moonlight, Swiftcloud could make out the shimmering transparent shape of a cat standing beside Whitestar on her perch. The spirit wrapped its tail around the front of the leader, hugging her to it's body as it's starry green eyes locked themselves upon Swiftcloud. Swiftcloud would recognize that figure anywhere. *Chicorynose!* Had she come back as a sign of her approval?
Swiftcloud blinked. No sooner she had taken notice of the fallen warrior, she was gone, leaving Swiftcloud alone with the decision she had made.

"Yes, Whitestar," she finally spoke as the crowd parted to let her step forward. Swiftcloud dipped her head respectfully then raised it once again as she settled in front of clanmates. She could feel the moonlight cast upon form, placing her right into the spotlight. In this moment she felt all of her anxiety leave her body. Starclan's will granted her courage. "I humbly accept this offer. It will be an honor to serve as Grassclan's deputy."

"Swiftcloud!" Shadowfang caterwauled with brightest smile on his

face.

"Swiftcloud! Swiftcloud! Swiftcloud!" The clan began to cheer along. Swiftcloud's pelt grew warmer with every chant and cheer Grassclan raised in her honor, the purr in her chest unlike any that had come from her before. But her moment of joy was cut short as Snowfrost's furious caterwauls split through the camp. Rabbitstorm and Beetlepatch looked as though they were struggling to contain her.
Whitestar glared over into the prisoner's direction, her fur standing on end. Saying she looked displeased at the interruption would be an understatement.

"I suppose now we should move onto our next order of business." Whitestar sounded bitter, her voice dripping with venom. Snowfrost was dragged to the front of the crowd, making cats step aside to allow the guilty medicine cat some space.
Dewstone padded over afterwards, settling herself in front of Grassclan's prisoner. Her expression was dark, riddled with the betrayal she must feel in the face of her kin.

"Snowfrost. Tonight, you are on trial for crimes against the Land's Star." Whitestar began. She sounded as if she'd gone through this process before, the words passing her lips with a trained ease. "Dewstone, address the charges of which she is being held accountable for."

Dewstone lifted her muzzle. "The cat you see before you has committed a crime that is not only against both the Warrior Code and Medicine Cat's Code, but against what should be one's moral code. She has acted upon selfish whims, and has murdered a cat in cold blood. And not just any cat; but Grassclan's deputy."

"Do you have any explanations for what you have done?" Whitestar asked Snowfrost. "Do you have a justified reason for killing Chicorynose?"

"No, Whitestar," Snowfrost muttered coldly through gritted teeth. "I do not."

Whitestar nodded to Dewstone. Her tail lashed, as if she were trying

to get out some of her anguish with this movement alone. "Please, continue."

Dewstone nodded back before returning her attention to the crowd. "Furthermore, evidence has been brought forward that perhaps, this may not have been Snowfrost's first offense. Thanks to one of our brave warriors, and confirmation from our medicine cat, Goldensong; we now have suspicion that Snowfrost may have poisoned several of our recently deceased. Waspwing, Butterflytail, Ambereye, and Dovekit. As well as the attempted murder of our new deputy, Swiftcloud, just a quarter moon ago."
Swiftcloud's eyes grew wide with shock. So Whitestar had taken her accusations seriously? Swiftcloud wasn't previously aware that the leader had discussed her theory with Dewstone. She honestly hadn't thought Whitestar believed her at all, by the way she had been acting. Or perhaps she made it look that way. Maybe Whitestar was suspicious too, and that's why she'd shared the information with the Code Keeper. Regardless, Swiftcloud was glad to see that Snowfrost would be rightfully punished if it came to light that she really had been poisoning cats.

"Snowfrost, do you have anything to say in defense of yourself? If these accusations of are false, then this is the time to speak up," Whitestar prompted. She looked down at the medicine cat, the smallest twinkle of hope gleaming in her blue eyes. Perhaps Grassclan's leader still held the slightest bit of faith in Snowfrost. Whether it was foolish to or not. Swiftcloud couldn't blame Whitestar for that. Medicine cats were the highest authority in a clan, with their special connection to their ancestors. A leader was meant to hold a strong bond with their healers for that very reason.

"Unfortunately, I've no way to prove my innocence. Nor do I want to. I have no shame in what I have done," Snowfrost responded, voice eerily calm.
Gasps flitted around the clearing. Angry clanmates whispered among themselves while some tucked their bodies into kin for support. The clan was collectively in shock. How could Snowfrost remain so poised, despite basically confessing to a multitude of murders?
Whitestar shut her eyes, turning her head away in shame. If one

looked hard enough, they may be able to catch the slightest glints of tears at the corners of the leader's eyes. Whitestar took a deep breath to regain her composure. She placed her focus back onto Dewstone before speaking once again.

"All the evidence has been laid upon us. Now it is time to cast judgement. Dewstone, what is your conclusion?"

Dewstone stood tall, posture straight and head raised as she announced her verdict. "On the multiple charges of murder, this Code Keeper finds the accused to be guilty. Snowfrost's crime is an unacceptable offense. She deserves the harshest of punishments, such as name stripping, exile, or even execution." Dewstone looked up at Whitestar. "She has broken our Codes before, it would be what is best for the clan."

"Very well." Whitestar stepped onto the edge of the Tall Stone. "This cat has disgraced our clan by breaking the Codes of the Land's Star, using the name of a medicine cat to get away with these crime. Starclan has spoken their disapproval and have granted me the power to take this rank away, just as easily as it had been given to you before. *Snowfrost*, you are no longer to be known by this name, but simply as Snow. You have forsaken us, and no longer deserve to be a medicine cat of Grassclan. I say these words before the spirits of our ancestors, so that they may hear and approve of my decision." Whitestar yowled, "I hereby sentence the cat you see before us into exile!"

Chapter 53

Snow stared up at Tall Stone, tail thrashing violently. Her fur bristled to the point where she didn't even look like herself anymore.

"Idiots!" She snapped suddenly, whipping around to look at the crowd of her former clanmates. The lynx point molly's eyes blazed like icy blue flame, baring into each and every last member of Grassclan.

"Imbeciles...! You think exiling me will do you any good?" She scoffed, lifting her chin. "I have been killing you off one by one for moons, and none of you ever suspected. Why do you think the last two Leafbares have plagued us so terribly with greencough? You think if it were actually treated, so many would still have died?" A dark chuckle rose from Snow's throat. "Our catmint stores were purposely lost. I was prepared to let all of you die; ready to watch each and every last one of you *rot*... Until..." she turned, setting her sights on Swiftcloud. The white and black patched she-cat stood at full attention with ears flat against her head. The crowd behind her moved back, allowing the she-cats space in case a fight should ensue.
"*You*. You just had to ruin everything didn't you? *Swiftcloud*. Pathetic little kittypet. Why couldn't you have just died like a good little kitty, hm? Deathberries too good for you? Afraid *Starclan* won't accept you with open paws? Or are you just bound and determined to destroy me and all that I've worked on?" Snow began to circle Swiftcloud menacingly, never breaking the deputy's gaze. Swiftcloud kept turning to keep watch, not trusting enough to turn her back on the crazy medicine cat.
Another chuckle erupted from Snow's throat. It started off soft, barely audible, but slowly built up in volume. As the chuckle reached its limit it bubbled into a chilling maniacal laugh. Snow threw her head back to part her jaws and howl out the hilarity. The cats of Grassclan bristled at the noise, backing away with caution. Swiftcloud bared her fangs as the lynx point molly began to settle

down, resting her icy blue eyes back on her target.
"You were the one to find Waspwing's corpse. You were there during Butterflytail's last moments, and knew he couldn't have just been seizing. Ambereye too. Somehow you figured out that they had been poisoned. Heatherwing was found bleeding out all over the Forest Patch because of you. And you were right beside Jaybird when her drowned body was returned to us. You saw my fur between her claws too, didn't you? What a clever little cat you are." Snow's words came out like venom, oozing with sarcasm and loathing. Her lips peeled back into a sickening smile.

"Why...why would you do all of this?" Mistyleaf asked quietly. Snow whipped her head around to look at the fluffy silver she-cat, eyes narrowed to icicle thin slits. Mistyleaf stepped forward bravely in response, looking her aunt directly in the eye. She wanted answers, and it seemed that she was going to get them. For a moment, Snow's expression softened.

"Mistyleaf...*Mistyleaf*...! Darling little one. My sweetest daughter. I did it all for you; for all of my kits! You, Rabbitstorm and Frostfeather are my children after all. I had to take care of those who tore us apart." Snow paused in her path circling Swiftcloud, turning to fully face the medicine cat apprentice. Mistyleaf stood tall despite the enemy before her, though her eyes betrayed the fear that undoubtedly gripped her heart.

"You see; Goldensong was the one who told Whitestar about your birth, so I had to make her pay. Wasn't it obvious that I was the one who poisoned her? I even killed off her mother and her brother to torment her. I killed Butterflytail to get revenge on Whitestar too, you know; to throw her off my trail and to punish her for giving you to Jaybird. Heatherwing had to die for taking Rabbitstorm away from his duties. And Jaybird--oh my dear, *sweet* sister--she tried to keep me away from you three. After taking you and raising you in my place; not even allowing me to so much as mentor you, that alone had me ready to snap. But then she went on to have another litter. More kits! As if the three of you were not enough; as if the precious lives *I* had brought into the world were not good enough for her to be satisfied with. She had to go on and have her own kittens. That's when I knew I had had enough of her. But I

couldn't actually kill my sister. I loved her.... So I let the river do my dirty work. As for Ambereye, I never liked her. She took my sister away from me; poisoned her mind. So, I poisoned her to teach her a lesson." The lynx point molly took a pace towards Mistyleaf, her expression sinister.
Alarm shot through Swiftcloud, causing her muscles to bunch. She had to restrain herself from lashing out at the mad she-cat, not even wanting her to be within a flea-length of her mate. Especially after confessing to murder. Murders that the whole of Grassclan had wrongfully blamed on another of the Land's Star.
"And finally we come around to Swiftcloud," Snow continued. "That naive little kittypet. She thought she could come into our clan, make you fall in love with her, and have you make the same mistakes I did when I was your age. I couldn't bare to see that happen to you. So of course I had to poison her as well. But then...then you saved her. Why..? All for love? Love is useless to medicine cats! Your place is with your herbs; your heart belongs to the well-being of your clan. I expected better of you....I was only trying to protect you." Snow took a few more paces forward, closer to her supposed daughter. Mistyleaf reacted by backing away slowly; Frostfeather and Rabbitstorm coming to stand by her sides. Swiftcloud came around, jumping in front of the littermates protectively.

"You're lying!" Frostfeather caterwauled insistently. "You can't be our mother!"

"But I am! You are my kits. You three are the kits of myself and the Treeclan deputy, Wolfheart!" Snow countered. "Why else would I do all of this? It was all for you!"

"*Shut up!*" Rabbitstorm snarled. Snowfrost blinked, surprised. "Even if you did give birth to us, you will never be our mother. Jaybird and Ambereye are our mothers. You are barely worthy of being called kin. You killed the cat carrying your grand-kits. You poisoned your union-sister. You murdered your own twin! You are *not* our mother. You're hardly even a cat. Now...you're nothing more than a monster!"

"*No!*" Snow shrieked, swiping a paw with claws unsheathed in the littermates's direction. Swiftcloud was quick to tackle her, pinning

the furious she-cat to the floor. Snow caterwauled, struggling in the deputy's grip. She so desperately wanted to reach her children, but Swiftcloud would never let her. *I would die before allowing you to reach them!*

"You are a disgrace to Grassclan," Whitestar snarled from atop Tall Stone, interrupting the scene. Snow froze at the sound of the Grassclan leader's voice. "The crimes you have committed are so severe we cannot allow you to stay. Live as you have acted; like a rogue. Warriors, attack this cat without mercy. Kill her if you must. If she is not dead, then she must leave the Land's Star and never return. For if you shall, Snow, you will be met with the death you so rightfully deserve. You are no longer welcome among the Land's Star; *BEGONE*!" Whitestar roared and Swiftcloud finally let Snow go.
The lynx point molly rose to her paws. She panted for a heartbeat, glancing at the Grassclan warriors who snarled and growled at her. The clan began to close in on her, leaving only a narrow path for her to escape from. Snow at last darted, disappearing through the bramble tunnel. When she was out of sight, the warriors chased after her, spilling out of camp and into the meadow beyond the camp walls. The only warriors that remained were Swiftcloud and Shadowfang. The mates checked on Mistyleaf, grooming her cheeks affectionately.

A long time passed before Grassclan's warriors returned, exhausted from running all across the territory. The sun was just beginning to rise. No one had gotten any sleep.

Swiftcloud rose from her place beside the medicine den, checking everyone over. "What do you have to report?"

"We chased Snow all the way to the Treeclan border," Gingerstrike meowed. "When we got there she turned tail and attacked Thornpaw, splitting his ear. But he scared her off the rest of the way across the Thunder Path. She's far from Grassclan's territory by now."

Swiftcloud looked at Thornpaw with concern. "Are you ok?"

"Yeah, I'll be fine. At least I've got a cool new scar." The young tom

chuckled.

"Well go see Goldensong and have it cleaned. As for the rest of you, I want all of you to get some rest, you deserve it. We'll be doubling our patrols along the Treeclan border, and I want all Guard warriors protecting the nursery, medicine den, and the bramble tunnel." Swiftcloud announced. Warriors muttered their appreciation as they slipped past to rest in the warriors' den. Swiftcloud watched as each one disappeared, then escorted Thornpaw to see Goldensong. Whitestar came trotting over along with her other kit, Lightpaw, worry stuck on their faces. She licked at the tom's bleeding ear profusely.

"Mom, you have to let him go," Lightpaw groaned, bumping her forehead against the Grassclan leader's chin. Whitestar glanced at her, pulling away.

"He'll be fine," Swiftcloud assured, leaving him by the medicine den's entrance. Whitestar sighed, beckoning the deputy to follow her with a swish of her tail. The two mollies walked together back to the leader's den.

"We'll need to be vigilant for now on," Whitestar whispered. "I believe we should send a message patrol to each clan to warn them about Snow. Until she's dead, no cat or clan is safe. Who knows what she is capable of now that she has nothing left to lose."

"I agree," Swiftcloud replied. "I'll lead the patrol to Treeclan myself at Sunhigh. And I'll send warriors to the other clans before I depart. But I will be leaving Ladybugbite, Rabbitstorm, Tigerfang, and the apprentices here to help guard camp. Just in case Snow flees back to our territory. We can't risk her getting to the nursery, or harming either of our medicine cats. Or Starclan forbid, having her try and kill *you*."

Whitestar dipped her head gratefully. "Thank you, Swiftcloud. I did right when I brought you into this clan. Look at you now... You've grown into such an amazing cat. I'm proud to have you as my deputy. I'm proud to have had a cat like you to fulfill the prophecy given to me all those moons ago."

Swiftcloud tilted her head curiously. "Prophecy?" she echoed. Whitestar sighed, turning her eyes upwards.

"*'Swiftness will fortify your ranks, but hurry, snow's unyielding frost threatens the balance of the Land's Star'*. I didn't know what it meant back then. But I do now. You are the Swiftness who has strengthened our ranks. Snowfrost was the one threatening the balance. You've saved us, Swiftcloud. Grassclan is forever in your debt."

Swiftcloud blinked. "In my debt..? Stars, if anybody's in debt, it's me. To you, and to all of Grassclan. I'm so grateful to know you all, and to be able to fight so hard for you. I'd give up nine lives for this clan if I could."

"I don't think it's a matter of 'if you could', or not anymore.... You'll make a fine leader someday, Swiftcloud."

Swiftcloud looked at Grassclan's leader with concern, her question silently answered. The life Whitestar had lost in the battle...*she only has two left now*. Swiftcloud dipped her head, the weight of this realization almost too heavy to bare. Whitestar swiped her tail under Swiftcloud chin, encouraging her to stand more proud.

"Chin up. We must remain strong for the clan. No matter how hard things may become. That is the first lesson you must learn before your time to earn nine lives comes. And there are many more things I must teach you before then. Come."

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Swiftcloud found herself standing at the heart of a sparkling field the following evening. The sky was a vast inky blue ocean above her head. Silverpelt shone brighter than the white and black patched molly had ever seen it before. The stars themselves appeared to dance, welcoming Swiftcloud's presence. Where was she? Last thing she remembered was curled up in the medicine den, tucked between Shadowfang and Mistyleaf. She had no recollection of going anywhere else. Could that mean she was dreaming? Swiftcloud took a few paces forward, parting her jaws to taste the air as she glanced around. A few fox-length ahead, she caught a
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whiff of a group of familiar scents. They tasted of Grassclan. But there was an icy hot crispness to the collective smell too.
Swiftcloud continued onward. She padded down the steep slope of a hill, surprised to find a veil of mist settled just below. Swiftcloud hesitated for a moment, noticing a group of cats standing just before the fog. Her heartbeat suddenly picked up. She recognized those warriors. The patched she-cat suddenly found her paws moving for her, pulling her closer and closer to the patrol waiting at the bottom of the hill.
At the head of them stood a beautiful and proud fawn colored she-cat. She talked amongst her group, before turning to face the approaching warrior.

"Chicorynose-" Swiftcloud choked out, finding her voice failing her. And it wasn't by choice. It felt as though there was dandelion fluff clogging in her throat, preventing her from saying more.
The recently lost deputy was not the only cat among the crowd. Waspwing was there; Butterflytail and Ambereye too. Heatherwing, Dovekit, Cricketsong's litter, and all of the other cats Grassclan had lost in the past couple of years were also present. Even a few that Swiftcloud had met previously in a nightmare. Everyone looked well groomed and healthy, their pelts gleaming with stars. There weren't any signs of sickness or pain in any of them. They all seemed happy. Were these Starclan warriors?
There was so much Swiftcloud wanted to say at this moment. So many questions she needed to ask. But the deputy knew it was not her ancestors' will to be spoken with at this time. So instead, Swiftcloud bowed to them; a silent way of paying her respects and getting her message across, that she was grateful to them all. To have known these cats. To have brought them justice at long last.
Chicorynose stepped up to her, swiping her tail beneath her apprentice's chin. Swiftcloud lifted her head to lock eyes with her mentor--her mother figure-- one last time.
Chicorynose purred softly, touching her nose to Swiftcloud's. She smiled as she pulled away; a sad yet grateful grin.
"Thank you," she whispered, then turned. She padded back into the crowd of spirits, leading them through the misty veil and out of sight. The only thing left to prove they had been there at all, was stardust.

Epilogue

Three moons had passed. The long cold season of Leafbare melted away with the snow, blossoming into Newleaf fresh flowers on the meadowy hills. Bloom's Day was here again, and Grassclan was as busy as ever. None were so busy as Swiftcloud was that day.
She was in the medicine den, flanked by Mistyleaf. The pale silver she-cat was placing tiny pink and blue flowers all over Swiftcloud's pelt, decorating her traditionally for a deputy. Nearby, Goldensong was weaving together her flower crown.

"Almost done," Mistyleaf mewed as she placed one last flower onto her mate's chest fur. "There! You look lovely, Swift."

"Thank you," Swiftcloud purred, licking her lover's cheek. Mistyleaf trilled, leaning against her.

"You'd better run along now. Tulippaw and her sisters must be getting antsy waiting for their warrior's assessments to begin," she reminded Swiftcloud.

"You're right," Swiftcloud agreed, rising to her paws. "I'd better go and fetch their mentors, then."

With a parting nod to the medicine cats, Swiftcloud turned and padded out into the clearing. A beautiful sight greeted her eyes as she walked around, gathering her fellow mentors for today's assessment. The camp was perfectly decorated for the day's celebration; flowers and feathers dotting the dens, berries placed ever so delicately along thresholds. Even Tall Stone had gotten a makeover in honor of the holiday. The youngest apprentices, with the help of the clan's kits, painted a lovely picture across the front of the ancient boulder with berry juice. Swiftcloud couldn't tell exactly what was being depicted, but she admired the young cats' creativity nonetheless.

"Swiftcloud," Quailbelly called as she padded up to the deputy and the mentors. "Rabbitstorm and I are ready to help."

"Excellent," Swiftcloud purred. Cinderpaw and Bunnypaw were out gathering flowers, leaving their respective mentors, Quailbelly and Rabbitstorm, with nothing to do. Both cats had been eager to receive an apprentice. Bunnypaw was Rabbitstorm's first. And Quailbelly was doing her best to train young Cinderpaw. After losing her first apprentice, Thistlepaw, Whitestar and Swiftcloud agreed it was only fair to give Quailbelly another chance at mentoring. And she was happy. But the relief on her face made it obvious that she was glad for a break today. Rabbitstorm seemed even more happy to get away from his energetic little brother.

"What do you need us to do?" He asked, standing beside Quailbelly. At this time, Tulippaw, Nectarpaw, Pansypaw, Pollenpaw and Tabitha had come to Tall Stone to pair up with their mentors.

Swiftcloud flicked an ear towards them as she spoke. "I need each of you to take out one of my apprentices for me, while I assess everyone's progress from the sidelines."

"I'll take Tulippaw," Quailbelly offered.

"Guess that'll leave me with Tabitha," Rabbitstorm snorted.
Though he may sound annoyed, Swiftcloud couldn't miss the excited little smirk he gave. She knew the pair were growing close. But she also knew Rabbitstorm was not the sort of warrior to mess around when given an assignment. "I'll make sure she stays focused," he swore, as if he could read the deputy's mind. He dipped his head to her respectfully, Quailbelly copying his motion.
For the short time she had been deputy, Swiftcloud had already managed to gain the respect of her clanmates. At first it was jarring--having cats bow their heads, as if she were such an important figure--but soon enough, she adjusted to the change. Cats listened when she gave orders, and were comfortable with coming to her to report news. Maybe Whitestar had made a good choice when choosing Swiftcloud. Three moons in, and she already felt so accustomed to her new role. It gave her purpose; a new reason to wake up in the morning.

"Right. Let's head out," Swiftcloud ordered. Each pair began to make their way out into the meadow, already prepared to take their apprentices to predetermined destinations.

Before Swiftcloud followed through the bramble tunnel, she couldn't help but spare a glance back at the nursery. The honeysuckles were in bloom, alive with a comforting fragrance. Swiftcloud had grown quite used to it by now, finding herself almost regretful about not staying behind to lounge beneath it with the queens.

"We'll be alright, go have fun! And make sure you tell me all about the assessments when you all return!" Cricketsong called out as she emerged from the den. Her single half-moon old kit poked his head out from between her front legs, observing the world outside curiously. Swiftcloud let out a purr of amusement, smiling.

"I will!" She promised, ducking out of the clearing at last.
A canvas of green greeted the cats as they made their way over the hills, a rainbow of flowers speckled across the meadow like pollen. A strong breezed gusted past, flattening the foliage around them like thin fur. As it calmed, the flowers sprung up once again, reaching up for the warm Newleaf sun. Swiftcloud cherished this time of year, reveling in the nostolgia and comfort of it all. It was just over a year ago that she had come to join the cats of the meadow; to learn what it meant to be wild and free. Her dreams had become a reality, and Swiftcloud couldn't be happier if she tried.
As the cats reached the heart of the meadow, partners broke off to spread out in different directions. This ensured each apprentice had enough space to demonstrate their abilities without running the risk of interrupting denmates. Swiftcloud watched them all walk off, waiting around for a while before stalking after a randomly chosen pair. She decided to check out how Pansypaw was doing first. She was the youngest of this graduating class, too young to technically be ready for warriorship. But Pansypaw had proven herself to be a fast learner, leading Whitestar to approve of her testing out of apprenticeship early. Swiftcloud had to observe her extra carefully to ensure Pansypaw was ready to be moved up in the ranks. Frostfeather certainly seemed to think so, but as deputy, Swiftcloud needed to observe for herself.
So as quickly but as silently as she could, she stalked through the overgrown grass, following the scent trail of the cats she was set to watch.

"Swiftcloud!"
Or maybe would, if her rambunctious apprentice could follow the rules for a change.

"Tulippaw!" Swiftcloud called back, meeting the brown and white molly. How had she managed to track Swiftcloud down?
Tulippaw had grown quite tall in the fourteen moons she had been alive, standing even taller than her own mentor. She was a perfect example of a Grassclan warrior. Lithe, with large ears and long legs. Yet muscles rippled beneath her short pelt, built up over moons from vigorous battles and training. Training which Swiftcloud had been more than happy to give her.

"Are you going to watch me hunt?" Tulippaw asked.

"Yes, that's part of the assessment," Swiftcloud responded. "But you aren't supposed to pay attention to me being here. I'm observing from the sidelines today. Quailbelly is who you're presenting to. Where is she anyways?"

"Flirting with Frostfeather." Tulippaw rolled her eyes. "She can't help herself. She's so proud of her mate for mentoring the youngest soon-to-be warrior of the clan."

Swiftcloud resisted the urge to groan. Originally, she'd been worried about a cat like Tabitha getting distracted during the assessment. She hadn't taken into account that Quailbelly might act up instead. "Thanks for letting me know. I'll go and have a chat with her. You get back to hunting ok? And don't worry about wherever I might be hiding next time."

"Yes, Swiftcloud," Tulippaw agreed, nodding her head before turning around and padding back out into the grass.
Swiftcloud continued on in the direction she was heading, parting her jaws slightly to taste the air for Quailbelly. She caught onto her trail quickly, scenting the molly only a couple of tree-lengths off.

"Quailbelly!" She called, summoning the warrior to her. The tone she used was stern, alerting the warrior that she was not at all pleased with her behavior.

"S..sorry, Swiftcloud!" Quailbelly dipped her head as she ran up to the deputy. "I didn't mean to get distracted..."

Swiftcloud twitched her whiskers. "Its alright, Quailbelly. Let's leave Frostfeather and Pansypaw be now. Go and see how Tulippaw is faring for me?"

"Of course, right away!" Quailbelly agreed, racing off to watch her niece hunt. She made it to her just in time to watch the apprentice put Swiftcloud's bird hunting technique to work.
Tulippaw crouched to the ground a fox-length upwind from a clueless wood pigeon. The ignorant bird was busy picking at seeds, while Tulippaw stalked ever closer, wiggling her haunches. With only a heartbeat more of hesitation, she shot out from her hiding place, scaring the pigeon into taking flight. Tulippaw leaped gracefully in the air after it, grabbing her prey by its wings, plucking it out of the sky. As the apprentice fell back to the earth she pulled the wood pigeon closer to herself; grabbing its neck and snapping it just as her paws touched the ground below.

"Great catch!" Quailbelly praised, prancing up to meet with the brown and white molly. Swiftcloud purred in her place approvingly, turning tail once more to hunt down her original target.

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Sunhigh was reaching it's end by the time the assessments had concluded. When the cats had returned home, Swiftcloud was pleased to report that all five apprentices had passed their tests with little disruption. Whitestar approved of Swiftcloud's observations, calling forth the other mentors to talk with them before it was finally decided the leader would hold a warrior's ceremony today. *Earning your warrior name on Bloom's Day, what an honor*, Swiftcloud thought as she headed out of the leader's den with her head held high. She hadn't thought it would happen today. She was sure with everything else going on, Whitestar would have waited to hold the ceremony until tomorrow. But the apprentices got lucky.

"Let all cats old enough to run across the meadow, gather here beneath the Tall Stone for a clan meeting." Whitestar called together all of those who had returned home to camp. A majority of
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Grassclan was here already, with the exception of a border patrol or two. Most had been hanging by the medicine den, waiting to receive their flower crowns and collars for the holiday. Others had been sharing tongues, careful not to destroy any blossoms that were placed on their fur.
A buzz of excitement swept through the atmosphere as the clan gathered. The excitement of new warriors, and the joy of the holiday made everyone's spirits light. But Swiftcloud knew no one could be as thrilled right now as apprentices were. They were already waiting by the front of Tall Stone, grooming each other's fur down in a last ditch effort to make themselves look perfect.
Whitestar gazed down at this season's graduating class fondly, tail raised high to greet them. The leader's focus shifted briefly to rest upon their mentors, in order to complete the first part of the naming ceremony. Swiftcloud shuffled to her place by Tall Stone's base just as Whitestar began to speak.

"This Bloom's Day, we have a lot to celebrate. The arrival of Newleaf and good hunting; the promise of flowers and new life. And today, I get to perform my favorite duty as Grassclan's leader," she began, then cleared her throat. "The young cats you see before us have completed their training met all the goals set for them, and have learned the Warrior Code. Snailear, Ladybugbite, Swiftcloud, Frostfeather; do you believe your apprentices are ready to become warriors?"

"I do," agreed all four mentors in unison.

Whitestar nodded, acknowledging their decision. "In that case; Nectarpaw, Pollenpaw, Tulippaw, Pansypaw, and Tabitha, please step forward."
The five mollies did as they were commanded, the brightest of expressions showing on their faces. Nectarpaw and Pollenpaw glanced at each other excitedly. Tulippaw and Tabitha shook tails. And Pansypaw cleaned her chest fur, straightening her posture.
Whitestar turned her muzzle towards the sky briefly. "I, Whitestar, leader of Grassclan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on these apprentices. They have worked hard to learn the ways of your nobel Code, and I commend them, to you, as warriors in their turn. Nectarpaw, Pollenpaw, Tulippaw, Pansypaw, Tabitha, do you

promise to uphold the warrior code; to protest and defend this clan, even at the cost of your life?

"I do," the apprentices chimed at once, heads held high.

"Then by the power of Starclan, I give you your warrior names." Whitestar lowered her head to look at the first of the apprentices. "Nectarpaw, from this day forward you shall be known as Nectarbite. Starclan honors your tenacity and skill, and we welcome you as a full warrior of Grassclan."
The siamese she-cat jumped down from Tall Stone, approaching the newly named warrior. Swiftcloud rose to meet her, passing on a flower which the leader then placed behind Nectarbite's ear. Nectarbite took a step forward to lick Whitestar's shoulder out of respect, while the leader placed her chin on top of her niece's head, following tradition. After another heartbeat, Whitestar stepped back to continue the ceremony.
"Pollenpaw, from this day forward you will be known as Pollenstep. Starclan honors your attentiveness and tracking skills, and we welcome you as a full warrior of Grassclan."
Again, Whitestar placed a flower onto the new warrior before resting her muzzle against her head, Pollenstep gratefully licking her shoulder before moving back to smile. Next, Whitestar gave her attention to the last of her young kin. Swiftcloud felt a flare of pride in her chest as she watched her first apprentice be named.
"Tulippaw, from this day forward, you will be known as Tulipnose. Starclan honors your curiosity and tracking skills, and we welcome you as a full warrior of Grassclan."
A daffodil was placed behind Tulipnose's ear. *A fitting flower*, Swiftcloud agreed as she watched Whitestar rest her chin on the warrior's forehead. Tulipnose licked her shoulder, then glanced past the leader, beaming at Swiftcloud as if to say *"look I did it I'm a warrior now!"*. Swiftcloud purred, nodding her approval.
"Pansypaw. From this day forward you shall be known as Pansyfrost. Starclan honors your quick thinking and intelligence, and we welcome you as a full warrior of Grassclan." Whitestar continued. Pansyfrost looked as if she were going to cry once the traditional forehead touch/shoulder lick was finished. Swiftcloud wondered if she was tearing up with happiness. Or maybe she was wishing that her kin were alive to witness this great

accomplishment.
Whitestar then turned to address the last apprentice waiting to receive their name.
"And finally, Tabitha. You have worked very hard in the short time that you've lived within the Land's Star. Though your training is not yet complete, I do believe you've earned your right to obtain a clan name. So, from this day forward, you shall be known as Mothlight. And upon your request, the clan will continue to honor you as Tabitha, within our borders. Starclan honors your cheer and positivity, and we welcome you as full warrior of Grassclan."

"Nectarbite! Pollenstep! Tulipnose! Pansyfrost! Mothlight!" The clan broke out into an excited chant for the new warriors, calming slightly when Whitestar swayed her tail.

"Nectarbite has chosen the duties of a Guard and Fighting warrior. Pollenstep has requested to be a Guard and Den Keeper. These two shall henceforth be partners. Tulipnose will be a Hunting warrior, and Pansyfrost has chosen Collection and Hunting for her duties. These two shall also be paired. Finally, Tabitha has decided to remain a permanent nursery queen, as well as a Collector. She will be paired at a later time, when someone becomes available," the siamese she-cat announced. "But for now, these warriors shall rest. And tonight, they shall sit a silent vigil, guarding the camp while the rest of us sleep, to show they are true warriors of this clan."
As the ceremony concluded the clan broke away from their seated positions surging forward to surround and congratulate the new warriors. Swiftcloud padded into the crowd to join them, finding Tulipnose wrapped up in the embrace of her father, Cowpatch. At the sight of her mentor, Tulipnose lit up, excusing herself from her kin so they could speak. But before she could say a word, a yowl broke out, silencing the whole clan.

"Whitestar!"

"Swiftcloud!"

Thornpaw and Lightpaw called as they ran into camp, disrupting the celebration. Shadowfang and Beetlepatch came rushing behind them.

"What's going on?" Whitestar asked, turning to meet her kits. She licked Thornpaw on his cheek then groomed Lightpaw between the ears in an attempt to calm her litter down. Swiftcloud came to stand beside the leader, eager to hear about the urgent matter that had brought the patrol home early.

"We have important news to report," Beetlepatch informed with a slight pant.

"Swiftcloud," Shadowfang meowed, as if the news were meant for her. "Snow is dead."

"What...?" She asked breathlessly. She felt her pelt begin to bristle at the mention of the exiled medicine cat's name.

"That's right," Thornpaw confirmed. "We met a Treeclan patrol who'd crossed the Thunder Path."

"They were heading this way to report their discovery to Grassclan when our patrols met. Blackberry said a hunting party found Snow's body on their territory, mangled. They wanted to find out if we wanted her brought back so she could be put in our burial grounds," Shadowfang explained.

"What did you tell them?" Whitestar questioned, tail twitching slightly.

"Obviously we told them no!" Thornpaw scoffed. "Scum like Snow doesn't deserve to have the honor of being buried among warriors!"

"Strong words from such a young cat," Swiftcloud remarked, cuffing the tom playfully around the ear. "I hope you didn't say that to Treeclan."

Lightpaw shook her head. "Of course not! I'd never let this mouse-brain have the chance to yowl out something so blunt. Beetlepatch told them that Snow should be treated as a rouge, and that Treeclan can deal with her remains however they sees fit. Was that alright...?"

"Yes. I think that situation was handled as it should. Thank you, Beetlepatch, Shadowfang. And you too, my loves." Whitestar them

turned towards the clan. "Grassclan can finally rest easy. The evil that had once lingered within our ranks has been vanquished for good!"
At this, the clan broke out into another uproar of cheers. They seemed elated, having yet another thing to celebrate this day. Swiftcloud found herself to be as happy as the rest. Though she could feel her body growing weak from the work that had been done today. She needed a break from all the hype and noise from the clan. So, she retreated to the nursery.
The space beneath the honeysuckle bush was cool, the faintest bit of light dappling the wool lined ground underpaw. Swiftcloud sighed with relief as she entered. The nursery walls muffled most of the commotion going just outside, allowing all residents within some peace. Swiftcloud found herself to be alone in here, with the exception of the clan's youngest residents. Cricketsong's son was dozing in their nest, his body hanging halfway out of the bracken as he napped.

"Hi Swif!" Greeted Tabitha's single kit, bouncing up in front of the deputy. "The kits are good. They're asleep," he informed her as he followed her gaze to the nest at the further end of the den.

"Thank you, Bramblekit," Swiftcloud purred, padding over to the extra fluffy pile of wool. She stuck out a paw, peeling some of it back to expand the nest enough to allow her to fit inside. Laying beneath the pulled back fluff were three dozing balls of fur. Swiftcloud purred softly as she tiptoed around them, turning to tamp down the wool some more before laying down besides them. The kittens stirred slightly at her presence, turning onto their bellies to wiggle closer to her.

"Hi, my loves," Swiftcloud whispered, guiding the little ones to settle into her side. She repositioned herself, allowing the kittens the chance to feed if they so chose. They had only been born three days ago, and though they were no bigger than a shrew, they were healthy and full of life. It had barely been a surprise when Swiftcloud found out she was expecting. Shadowfang and Mistyleaf both were over the moon learning the news. The announcement of kits was welcomed after all the hardship and death they'd faced the moon before. And now, having them here felt like a dream come

true. Swiftcloud was smitten with her litter. Every time she was with them, she couldn't help but gaze upon them with fondness. The oldest of the bunch was a black tomkit with a snow white underbelly and legs to match. His tail was long and skinny just like Shadowfang's, which made him stand out from his littermates. His brother was an almost perfect copy of Swiftcloud; his pelt was white with black patches and he had an adorable bunny tail perched upon his rear. But his ears were as large as a typical Grassclan kit's, which Mistyleaf had pointed out to be adorable. Swiftcloud's lastborn was a beautiful shade of black. He had just the slightest bit of stock in his build, and a nubby tail just like his mother. They were the most beautiful kittens Swiftcloud had ever seen.

Swiftcloud began to groom her brood as they settled down for another nap, allowing her mind to wander while she focused on her task. She found her thoughts drifting back to almost a season ago, when war had plagued the clan of the meadow, and an unknown threat lurked within their borders. She thought of Snowfrost, and how the treacherous medicine cat had almost ruined her chance to experience the life she lived now. What would have happened, had she succeed in murdering Swiftcloud? Would the war have continued? Would Snow have gotten what she was after, allowing Grassclan to be destroyed? Swiftcloud shook her head, attempting to rid it of such theoretical questions. She bowed her head and buried her nose into her kits' fur, allowing their tiny purrs to wash away any of fears that had started building up inside of her.

For a little while, a calmness settled upon Swiftcloud, one like she hasn't felt in moons. Snow was gone for good, and nobody had to worry anymore. But as she felt sure in her bubble of peace, an eeriness slowly pierced its way through once more. It creeped upon Swiftcloud like a shadow in the night, causing her fur to stand involuntarily. The same sensation she had felt whenever Snow was around had returned. But why? *There's nothing to worry about*, Swiftcloud assured herself, smoothing down the fur on her three sleeping kittens. But then why did she still feel like there was something wrong?

End of Book One